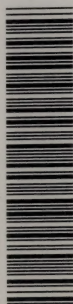


The Hope and Mission of  
THE FREE CHURCHES  
REV. ED. SHILLITO, M.A.



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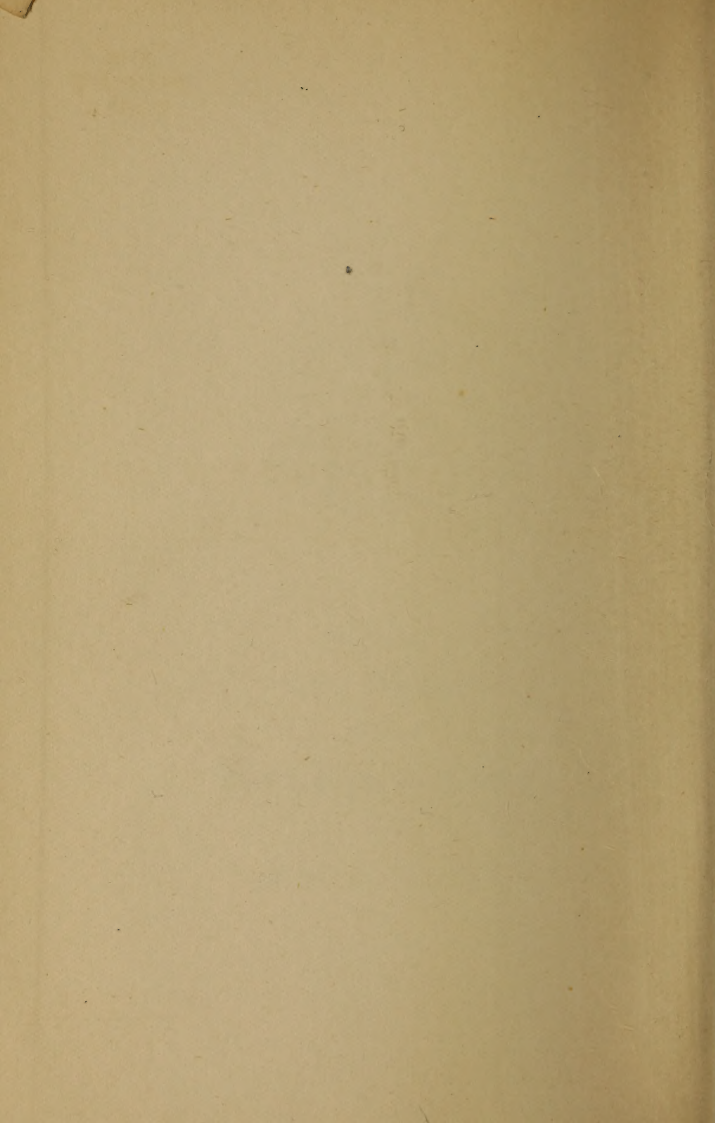


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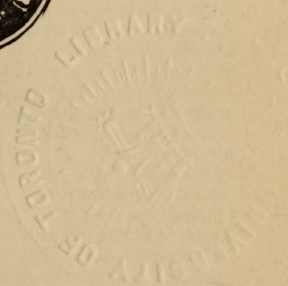


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# THE HOPE AND MISSION OF THE FREE CHURCHES

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# THE HOPE AND MISSION OF THE FREE CHURCHES

## CHAPTER I

### THE STANDPOINT

NO student of religion or of history can afford to neglect the Free Churches. The historian will detect their hand in every movement within the nation since the Commonwealth. But for them the entire history would have taken another course; their positive witness, as well as their protest, is written upon the English constitution; and their hand is still more clear in the history of the new world. Modern democracy, it is claimed by M. Borgeaud, takes its origin from the compact signed in the cabin of the *Mayflower*, in which the Pilgrim Fathers sailed to America. Nor can the movements of thought in the present day be explained without some attempt to understand the mind of these communities. Wise statesmen are not likely to forget the Free Churches. Yet it is possible even now to meet with those who think of them as survivals of the past and consider their existence as a pathetic example of an attachment to things once vital, but now dying or dead. The Roman Church, and the Anglican, they will take into account; but the third great division of Christendom among our race is



ignored. This attitude, however, is becoming tenable only as a pose.

The scientific students of religion are finding in these communities a fact of critical importance; they are seen to be a contribution of supreme value for the study of the Reformation in its logical issues. They represent in this land, perhaps, the most distinctive product of the Christian Faith in its work upon the national character. The Anglican Church has had indeed its unique witness; no Church in other lands has manifested its temper and atmosphere. The Roman Church within these islands, and still more in America, has not been uninfluenced by the character of the English-speaking race. But even more significant and distinctive has been the rise of the Free Churches. Among the Continental nations there have been Free Churches, but they have had little strength; the principles for which they stand can be seen in their maturity only in the United Kingdom and the Dominions beyond the seas, and in the United States.

There are indications that the value of the history of these Churches for the scientific students of religion is being more and more recognised. In them the Reformation comes to itself. They are the end by which the nature of the movement is to be understood. The storm-centre of the Reformation was in Germany or Geneva; its greatest names were those of Luther and Calvin. Yet it was in English soil that the Reformed Faith took deepest root, and there the final significance of that conflict of the spirit must be studied. Nowhere had the Reformation so ignoble a setting as in England, where the claims of the Papacy seem to have been but a counter in the hands of Henry VIII. Yet in this land the Reformation found its fulfilment.



This can only be seen when the student turns from the arena of political and ecclesiastical intrigues to the inner life of the people ; and in that inner life the most distinctive fact is the growth of the Free Churches.

But there are few scientific students ; and there are many who are concerned to see their way through the tangle of the present moment. For them the chief interest in these Churches will be their claim to give a *third alternative*. If a Christian believer finds that he must deny the authority of the Roman Church, and that he cannot accept the belief in a State Church, is there any third way ? The Free Churches claim that in their midst such a man may still have a place within the Church of Christ. In other lands, too often there are but two choices ; men must be in communion with the Roman Church, or the Protestant Establishment, or pass out of all fellowship in the Church. Among the Anglo-Saxon peoples there is always another alternative. The man who is not a Roman Catholic or an Anglican can still be a Churchman and in communion with the Universal Church.

Numbers are no test of truth ; but they are a certain clue to human needs. If this alternative were not needed, it would be hard to explain why among the four leading Free Churches there are more than twenty-one millions of communicants. They present a fact which is the revelation of a demand and of a challenge not to be ignored. It is with the historic witness and the present hope of these Churches this book will deal. They will be treated throughout as the historic means, whereby the Church has recovered and preserved among our race for all Christendom certain truths without which Christianity would be incomplete.

But many may deny that these communities have

any right within the Church Catholic; it is possible to admire the rigour shown by such critics, but if their premisses lead to palpable absurdities, it is time they were re-examined. The member of one section of the Church, who rules out of the Church these vast communities, is like the man

“Who gives very long odds  
When long odds to him should be given”;

he is in danger of schism in his dealing with “schismatics.” But the attitude of the Free Churchman himself is clear. He will not separate himself from the Church Universal. If others unchurch him, he will not unchurch himself. He will claim to be within. It is true that the Free Churches arose within the Reformed Church, but their witness was not to truths first discovered in the sixteenth century. They claim to have rediscovered truths given once for all to the saints. They will not carry forward historical quarrels in the spirit of perversity, or revive things better forgotten. They do not rejoice in schism, which is in its true meaning the loveless separation of wilful men from the common brotherhood. They claim to be in the line of the Apostolic Church; and they are ready to submit their claims to the judgment of the New Testament. They will not consent to be counted outside the Church.

They can cease to be, therefore, only on certain conditions. Either their principles must be proved false and untenable, or they must be reduced to the grade of unessential things, or they must be accepted by the whole Church. Till these conditions are found, these Churches must venture upon the truth given to them, and trust to the strength of its appeal to win men. They venture upon such truths as these: there

can be freedom along with faith ; a Church without a priesthood ; a succession in the faith without "Apostolic succession" ; sacraments without a sacerdotal order ; a religious nation without a State Church. The persistence of their testimony will depend upon their power to set forth such truths as these. There is no other reason for their existence apart from the service of these truths. Since they are believed, to cease from them would be to betray a trust and impoverish all Christendom. If such truths ever became trivial or incredible the Free Churches would die. But there is another possibility : the time may come when they will cease to exist in their separate forms, because their witness has been accepted and incorporated into the truth and practice of the Church Universal.

Any search into the origins of the Free Churches must be prompted by the desire to discover *what precisely are those vital truths for which they stand*. It is no time for the revival of ancient quarrels. All the Churches have a hard battle before them, and anything trivial and petty will only make the battle harder. If they are wise, they will deal with things as they are, and with the demands of the coming age. No Church can live unless it has within it a prophecy of the future ; it will soon use up its past capital, if it lives only upon that. But it is this obligation in the present which sends them back to the past. Memory is called to the aid of hope. The Free Churches, for example, do not exist to recall outbursts of life which thrilled many hearts, when Elizabeth was queen, or in the time of the Georges ; they hold the secret of the future ; from them will come other recoveries of life within the Church. But in order to fulfil their future calling they must go back to their origins. No Free

Churchman will contend that the Free Churches either understand perfectly their calling or are adequate to it; they will do well to turn from the confusion of the moment to the past. And those who, while not in their ranks, still desire to understand their real significance, will find the history central to any estimate of the future.

What is the standpoint from which the past must be surveyed? From every side voices are heard bidding the Church gird itself for the tasks of a new age; for the moment the Church stands still, as though wearied or uncertain. "If thou hast run with the footmen, and they have wearied thee, how shalt thou contend with horses." For that sterner conflict the Church must make ready. If it returns to the past, it will be not to read into it whatever it please, but to read out of it all that can be discovered of the end and the method and the resources of its calling. The Free Churches no less than others must learn what belongs to their soul, since it is true of Churches, as it is of nations, that by the soul they are great and free. It is a time for the simplifying of ideals, and for intellectual sincerity; without there can be no health of soul. Other communities may move forward by the gathered momentum of other days; they may preserve a semblance of life through the very perfection of the outward form. But the Churches with which we have to do have no safeguard against decay in the splendour of art, or in a ritual "half as old as time," or in their accommodation to the ancient traditions of mankind. They confess that if the breath of the Spirit is withdrawn there is nothing in them but dry bones.

Little is carried forward among them by rite or ceremony or office. Their faith must vindicate itself



afresh with each generation. They do not turn back to history as reverent students of tradition. But this is their quest: to find how at certain moments there broke out the unmistakable life of the New Testament; how from valleys of death mighty armies arose at the breath of the Spirit; what word and what conditions preceded such resurrections, when life triumphed over machinery and spirit over the tyranny of outward forms. They cannot do without such quests as these.

One who writes of the Roman Church has authoritative documents upon which to rely. There are no such documents for the Free Churchman. He cannot quote as binding the interpretations given in past days; nor can he carry over all the witness of his fathers. He is eager to know not how little he can surrender, but *how much*. Not everything is of equal value. This is true of all Churches, but the Free Churches can admit it without any dismay. When the new life came to the men of other days, its glory transfigured much in their thought which had no permanent value. It is to the Word of Grace, which brought them low and exalted them, that eyes must be turned—to those creative experiences which followed inevitably upon the incoming of new life, and not to the mere accidents.

The search will be for something *positive*. In every case the Free Churches took their rise because of some positive witness to the method of God in His Church. They come from days when a creative spirit moved upon the hearts of the people. They belong to the *romantic movements* of history. They go back to hours when some outburst of new life was felt and things happened. Much that is reckless and unbalanced may be blended with the experience;



at such times men are drunk as with new wine ; from such scenes of excitement many will shrink ; they are attached to authorised and accepted ways, and to the traditional channels through which spiritual influences have come. They will belong more to the classical school. But the Free Churches rest upon the reality of seasons of resurrection within the Church, when life proved stronger than mechanism, and the new wine had to have new bottles.

The Anglican Church has been throughout its history a noble representative in its order and charm, as well as in its limitations, *of the classical mind*. For the same reason it lost Wesley and Newman. And it was inevitable that in the great hours of crisis; when new life was struggling for expression, that means of grace should be sought other than those of the Anglican Church.

Or to put the same truth otherwise, the Free Churches stand, as Mr. H. W. Clark has shown in his invaluable *History of Nonconformity*, for the subordination of all organisation to the spiritual life—for the recovery by which from within the Church the Gospel vindicates its living power against the paralysing influence of machinery. In all creative moments the form is secondary ; but afterwards human nature lulls itself to rest in these very forms. Men protect themselves by the ancient bulwarks against accessions of new life. The real principle of Nonconformity, to which, however, it has never been perfectly faithful, is that the life must determine the form. So its history will be one of crises ; they will differ in different ages, but they will have this in common, life will be the first concern, and bondage to the Word will bring freedom towards man, and always the New Testament will be the ferment from which the life will spring, and it

safeguard from excess. For the Book will be the sword whereby the Spirit guards His work from man's fitfulness and extravagance.

Before there were "Nonconformists" there was Nonconformity. The Church has always had the miraculous power of recovery from within; it has had sentence of death passed upon it many times, but at such times there has been some outburst of life. Sometimes the agents of the Holy Spirit have been driven out of the Church, as the Montanists were in the second century, and both the Church and "the heretics" have suffered. Sometimes they have remained within to be assimilated, as the Franciscans were. But in either case they have brought new energy into the Church. Often the official Church has treated the new spirit with cruelty, and direct cruelty has not been so disastrous as isolation. But it would be easy to show how much the Church has owed to those who have been cast out. In every age there have been witnesses raised up to save the society from bondage to its own forms; even when the witnesses were rejected their work was not in vain. The historian of the Free Churches will find points of contact between them and the Montanists of the second century, and the monastic orders of the Middle Ages, and the many communities of devout people in Germany before the Reformation. These too were anxious to realise a more living fellowship, and to devise new channels for the new life. They are a witness to the necessity which, in later days, was laid upon the Nonconformists—the necessity to put the demands of the spirit before tradition, and to reject every institution which would exalt itself against those demands.

But the Free Churches represent a movement in the Church of greater significance than any in the days before the Reformation, and their full meaning does not yet appear. They would seem to have been shaped and reserved for a time that is not yet; they are not only of the past, they are of the modern world. They have shown a continuous life with powers of renewal and adaptation; they have faced many new calls, and they will face with quietness and confidence the call of the present age.

Enough has been said to sketch the standpoint of this book. It will be concerned with the past only to discover what can be learned for the immediate needs and the still greater calls of the future. It will seek to show how these communities, often banned as schismatics, may bring their peculiar treasures of insight and experience into the Holy Federation of Churches, which will await the coming of the Kingdom of God.

## CHAPTER II

### THE ORIGINS OF THE FREE CHURCHES

It is no easier to trace the movements within the soul of a nation than it is within the soul of a man. In each case the student must be prepared to find departures and crises, which appear to be sudden, and on examination prove to be the outcome of long and hidden preparations. He must be ready to allow for the work of unseen hands; he must remember the

“Crowd untold

Of the men by the cause they served unknown.”

This is true of the early history of Nonconformity, which can only be sketched here in the most meagre outline.

When the reader comes upon the "Separatists," in the reign of Elizabeth, he will not be content to begin with the fact of their witness within the religious situation created by the Reformation settlement. He must begin further back. To understand the harvest it is necessary, as Jesus taught, to know the soil as well as the seed. The soil from which, in history, the Free Churches had their origin, was the national character in the sixteenth century, as it had been shaped by many influences. Nonconformity, which began to be conscious of itself in the reign of Elizabeth, was one of the reactions made by the national character upon the Word of the Reformation. Its history cannot begin with that impatient idealist, Robert Browne, who wrote *A Treatise of Reformation without tarrying for Anie*; though he will be regarded with gratitude as a pioneer of Congregationalism, the oldest of the Free Churches in England; in Norwich (1580 or 1581), and in many parts of East Anglia, this scholar and leader gathered into communities believers who acknowledged the sole headship of Christ, and declared that the Church must consist of Christians and of none others. But long before Browne gave expression to the thoughts of many hearts preparations had been made; and it is one of the gains in modern historical research that it has established links between these early Churches and the spiritual movements of the ages before the Reformation.

Before that great upheaval the Church, both in its religious faith and practice, looks to be uniform—one Church, one creed, one order. But within many lands there were mutterings and rebellions; everywhere the devout few were eager for a worthier fellowship than they found in the Church, and without leaving its borders they formed groups in which the com-



munion of saints was found in simplicity. Great leaders, too, had arisen. In England Wiclif and the Lollards had prepared the way. It is no longer customary to write of Wiclif as though his work were a false dawn. Spirits such as he do not come in history as causes with no effects. He sought to lead the Church back to the Word of the New Testament; he believed in the spiritual calling of the Church, and fought against the corruption and idolatry within its borders; in his attack upon the doctrine of Transubstantiation he was not merely removing an error, he was anxious to establish the fact that there is "a real communication of life and grace from God to man"; the false must be taken away so that the true doctrine might be understood. "Wiclif based all he said and did upon the affirmation that in the innermost of life man must derive all he is direct from God."<sup>1</sup> Through his poor disciples, the Lollards, these teachings found expression, and were passed from man to man. The Lollards cannot be said to have been worthy of Wiclif, and their testimony was stamped out by persecution; they became silent, but it is clear that their influence did not die. It lived in communities where thought is slow and memories are long; and there is good reason to believe that a Wicliffite tradition was preserved in many places, preparing the way not only for Protestantism, but for Nonconformity.

The story of the Reformation on its political side is too well known to need repeating. Grave dangers, however, must be avoided; the story must not be isolated either from the past history of the English nation, or from the main course of European history; and some of the attention given to the intrigues of

<sup>1</sup> H. W. Clark, p. 68.



Henry VIII might be spared for the inner life of this island, as it was moved by the mighty currents of thought which thrilled the hearts of men on the mainland. The political changes belong to one plane, but it is to the other plane of national life that attention must be given. While Statecraft was manœuvring for position, and Parliament was prepared to substitute the Royal for the Papal supremacy, more ultimate questions were being asked, and answers given in the hearts of the common people. The reading of the New Testament acted as a ferment; the corruption of the Church began to be seen against the vision of the ideal. The questions raised had been answered by Luther and Calvin; and there was enough interchange between these islands and the Continent to make the teaching of the reformers a powerful factor in the inner life of the nation. Tidings came from Germany and Holland and Switzerland to a people in some degree prepared, for the same problems were met here, and the minds of many were feeling after the same answer.

At first sight the Reformation in England seems to run along a way of its own. Luther was driven to revolt against the Roman See by its corruption. Henry VIII could not make the Pope sanction his divorce. The occasions were different. But it would be a serious error to ignore that the same movement was taking place within the hidden life in both nations. To understand that, it is necessary to study those reformers of the Reformation with whom this book deals. They carried to their logical issue the great affirmations of Luther and Calvin; they were children of that age of travail, and in them there is to be found the point of contact between the Reformation in Europe

and in England. But long before the first separated Church was formed there had been a deep and widespread movement in this land: the Lollard tradition, and the power of the newly-translated Word, and the torrent of new thought which came from the Continental reformers—all were preparing the way for the Nonconformity which seemed to spring up suddenly at the preaching of Browne and Barrow. And with these influences must be classed the indirect witness of the Anabaptists: they were the reformers of the Reformation on the Continent; their socialism, their uncurbed mysticism, the extravagances of some of their number, have obscured the fact that they held truths in trust for the whole Church. They were stamped out in blood on the Continent, but in England their witness, purified and set free from much that was anarchical, came to itself, and in the Eastern Counties they helped to make the soil ready for the teaching of the Separatists.<sup>1</sup>

These things were happening while the Reformation settlement was engaging the minds of statesmen. There is ground for satisfaction that it was so; no Protestant can rest satisfied with the substitute provided by the Tudors for the ancient Church, and with the compromises found necessary; and it is necessary to remember that the significance of the Reformation was not interpreted finally by the negotiations between different schools within the Church in the reign of Edward VI and Queen Elizabeth. The new wine had to find new bottles. “It was in Elizabeth’s reign that the permanent settlement of the Church of England was reached—the settlement which, with compara-

<sup>1</sup> For a full discussion see Dr. Forsyth, *Faith, Freedom, and the Future*.

tively few modifications, endures to-day ; and it was in Elizabeth's reign that concrete, systematic, organised, what may be termed self-conscious Nonconformity, began."<sup>1</sup> Out of the confusion there emerged several schools of reformers. Some were Puritan in doctrine, but unwilling to alter the Church settlement. Others were Puritans of the Presbyterian order, who would have reorganised the Church upon a Presbyterian rather than an Episcopal model. The third section, to which the early Nonconformists belonged, separated themselves from the Church in order to realise their ideal of a Church as a company of Christian people, one in faith, however few. The names of Barrow, Penry, Greenwood, will always be held in honour ; and Robert Browne, though he did not remain among his people to the end, did a great work by his ardent and sacrificial labours. It was chiefly in the Eastern Counties than this preaching found readiest acceptance. It would be a mistake to imagine that these Separatists had thought their way through to a perfectly consistent view of the Church in its inner life, or in its relations to the State. They were more concerned with the practical needs of their faith. Even their leaders did not occupy what is to-day the Free Church position in its completeness ; but they grasped with remarkable courage and firmness the necessity for the purity of Christian fellowship and the rights of Christ in His Church.

Of these Separatists—or Brownists, as they were nicknamed—some were put to death, many were silenced or driven abroad to Holland. Through the strong hand of Whitgift, after 1693 the movement had been almost entirely checked in England.

The refugees found a home in Holland, and the

<sup>1</sup> H. W. Clark, p. 152.

significance of this fact cannot be overestimated. Holland and England, during the sixteenth and early years of the seventeenth century, were closely related. Englishmen fought in the Low Countries during that noble struggle between the Dutch Protestants and Spain. There was near at hand in Holland a country where the Puritan position was held with much that was gracious and attractive, and with more toleration than was customary in that age ; there also the more mystical side of the Anabaptist teaching was preserved by the Mennonites. To Amsterdam and Leiden the student must turn for some of the formative influences which have shaped the Free Churches of England and created the religious, and in some ways the political, ideals of the New World. To Holland the Separatists fled for refuge, but when they or their successors came back to England, or departed for America, they were not the same as when they came thither. They had come to understand more clearly their own doctrine of the Church.

When James I came to the throne there was a general hope that better days would dawn for the Puritans ; but James proved that distressing being, a pedantic bigot. Quite early in his reign the two Churches gathered at Gainsborough and Scrooby had to escape for Holland—the Gainsborough Church taking refuge in Amsterdam, and the Scrooby Church in Leiden. These communities are of critical importance, for in Amsterdam we find John Smyth and Thomas Helwys, who were the pioneers of the Baptist Churches ; and in Leiden the noblest of them all, John Robinson, the spirit of whose teaching was carried by the Pilgrim Fathers across the Atlantic. In these two communities must be found the promise of historical Congregationalism.

In 1610 Separatism “ began once more to hold up



its head." Henry Jacob organised a Congregational Church in London in 1616. Before that day Helwys, in 1611, established a Baptist Church in Newgate Street, London. Progress in both sections of Independents, as they were sometimes called, was steady for a time, and there was a better feeling between them and the Puritans who remained within the national Church. But the years 1630-1640 brought a change. Laud, with the aid of Charles I, controlled the Church, and sought to crush Puritanism. By his measures he drove many of them to the New World, and made others join the ranks of the Separatists. Among the founders of the Free Churches a place must be given to Whitgift and Laud, and in later years to the Earl of Clarendon.

How the struggle between Charles I and the Parliament arose is a familiar story. What, however, were the decisive facts which come within the range of our inquiry? These chiefly: the alienation from the king of the Scots, who were Presbyterian, through the attempt to force upon them an Anglican liturgy; the attempt of the Presbyterians, during the Long Parliament, as part of their bargain, to organise the Church of England upon the Presbyterian model; the very incomplete success of this experiment, made with much intolerance; the formation of the army under Cromwell, largely consisting of Independents, and at the last becoming master of the situation. It is of great importance to distinguish between the Presbyterians and the Independents. The issue between them was largely one of toleration. Though toleration in the modern sense was unknown, yet the Independents understood what it meant far more than the Presbyterians.<sup>1</sup>

The distinction is seen in the contrast between the

<sup>1</sup> See H. W. Clark.

Church, as Cromwell shaped it, and the Presbyterian domination during the Long Parliament. During the Protectorate, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Baptists, and Episcopalians occupied pulpits within the Parish Churches. In some cases two congregations might be worshipping in different parts of a large church or cathedral at the same time. Congregational Churches had their home in Westminster Abbey and in Exeter Cathedral. Sometimes the same preacher ministered in a Parish Church and in a gathered community without. The use of the Book of Common Prayer was forbidden; neither Presbyterianism nor Episcopacy was recognised. It was, however, a broad Church; and though the picture of religious life in England during the Commonwealth gives the feeling of confusion, yet there is a large comprehension in the ideal which Cromwell cherished; and in such places as Worcestershire, where Baxter formed his association of Churches on a generous basis, others beside Baxter must have found it "the comfortablest time" of all their lives. It is also abundantly clear that very many Episcopalians remained in office during this period.

The system appealed to the practical statesman. But there can be no doubt that the Congregationalists weakened their testimony to their doctrine of the Church by accepting office in the Parish Churches. It was during this period that George Fox, the founder of the Society of Friends, made his protest and gathered about him the like-minded. He came in the fulness of the times. There was some danger lest the truth which the Congregationalists were raised to proclaim should be lost. Fox testified once again to the reality and the immediacy of the spiritual life, which does not need any machinery for its creation or sustenance. "He took

the Bible as witnessing to a living spiritual presence which was real as ever after the Bible age had closed, and to the end of the world; and he held that the best use of the Bible was made when a man passed beyond the Bible itself to the changeless life and power of which it spoke.”<sup>1</sup> Fox gathered his followers into meetings; the first of these was formed at Sedbergh in 1653, and it was followed by others in other parts of the country.<sup>2</sup> The Quakers were persecuted, but they remained faithful and did a work of supreme value for the whole Church, and not least for the Free Churches, which were in some danger of the traditionalism which quenches the spirit.

When the Commonwealth came to an end the religious life in England was in a strange confusion. The materials were there for bold experiments in Christian statesmanship. Cromwell had sought for a comprehensive Church, but his scheme, never completed, remains only as a prophecy. Within the nation were the men who for one reason or another had been ejected from their livings. There were the High Churchmen of the school of Laud. There were also Puritan Churchmen of many shades of belief. In many places there were communities gathered apart from the Parish Churches after the order of the Congregationalists. There were some groups of Quakers. There were the Presbyterians within the national Church, some with only a nominal devotion to presbytery, and ready for a moderate episcopacy.

What was to be made of this situation? The answer came very soon after the return of Charles II. It was an answer which gave for two centuries and a half its character to English Church history. In 1662 the Act of Uniformity was passed.

<sup>1</sup> H. W. Clark, vol. i., p. 364.

<sup>2</sup> Selbie, p. 108.

## CHAPTER III

## 1662 AND AFTER

IN 1660 Charles II was restored with every sign of delirious joy. He had promised toleration; he would consider tender consciences in the matter of religion. There is no sufficient reason to think that he cared much for any religion, though his inclination is thought to have been towards Rome. His one fixed intention was to remain on the throne, and if it was necessary to break his promises to secure that end, he did so. Under the pressure of the anti-Puritan party in the Commons and the Lords, led by Hyde, Earl of Clarendon, the Act of Uniformity was passed in 1662. It did not represent by any means the national mind. The truth seems to be that the nation was glad to have the monarchy, but not at all eager to be drilled into uniformity in its religious belief and practice.

The Act was passed with the intention of crushing out all Nonconformity by coercion. Every beneficed minister was required to give his assent, before 24th August 1662, to all and everything contained in a revised Book of Common Prayer, which most of them had not seen. No ordination, except by episcopal hands, was to be admitted; the Solemn League and Covenant was to be declared illegal; and other requirements were added so that the presence within the Church of any except the Episcopalians of one school would be impossible. It was an Act levelled deliberately against the Nonconformists, who were described in such words as these, still on the Statute Book of England: "A great number of people in divers parts of this realm, following their own sensuality, and living without



knowledge and due fear of God, do wilfully and schismatically abstain and refuse to come to their Parish Churches and other public places. . . .”

On 24th August 1662, St. Bartholomew's Day, more than two thousand clergymen left their livings. The latest estimate gives the number at two thousand four hundred. They were not men of extreme views; they “held the English tradition of reformed Christianity at its purest”; many of them were prepared to accept a moderate episcopacy, great numbers were classed as Presbyterian, though it is probable that the word is used vaguely; some were of “no sect or party, but abhorring the very name of party”; and lastly, there were the Independents. What was the net result? Much hardship fell upon the evicted clergy, and not only they but others who did not conform suffered at the hands of the dominant party; in particular the Quakers were relentlessly harried. But the results extend far beyond the sufferings of that age. The Act which was to destroy Nonconformity gave to it new life, and Clarendon must count with Laud among its benefactors.

Before that day the Nonconformists had but few meeting-houses; they had existed in groups, but through their depth of conviction they had had a weight in England altogether out of proportion to their numbers. For the most part they had not abandoned the ideal of a Church sufficiently varied to give room for them within. The Act of Uniformity put an end to that hope and drove into the ranks of Nonconformists very many hitherto Presbyterian or Episcopal in their sympathies. It was in a sense the birthday of modern Nonconformity. For the Church of England it was a disaster; not only did it mean the loss of men whom no Church could lightly lose, Baxter, Howe, Henry, Owen, and others;

it meant that from that time there would be no Church which could claim to express the religious life of the nation. There was no uniformity existing; and coercion could never call it into being; as a matter of history coercion made the diversity more serious. "Saint Bartholomew's Day," said John Locke, "was fatal to the Church of England." In an hour when there was a possibility of a comprehensive Church the fierce spirit of party prevailed. The mind of the nation was vehemently loyal, but not ready for the control of one party in the Church. There is nothing to be gained at this hour from recriminations. No one defends the Act of Uniformity to-day, even as no one defends the ecclesiastical harshness of the Long Parliament; and many within the Church of England regret that the coercion was attempted which "severed it from the general body of the Protestant churches, whether Lutheran or Reformed."<sup>1</sup> It is more important to discover the permanent value of that historic protest in the religious life of England.

The Stuarts, who had always had to give much of their time to the problems of Church and State, and had acted foolishly in every crisis, were finally banished; and with the coming of William III the actual position of Nonconformity became defined by the *Toleration Act*. It gave freedom of worship; and by its denial to the Nonconformists of all part in the Establishment, "it left them free to work out their own salvation and to play their part in their own way in the religious life of the country. It also threw Nonconformists into the arms of the political party which stood for freedom and progress." From that day the decision became final that the Nonconformists

<sup>1</sup> J. R. Green.

must live in isolation from much that was central in the natural life. They were excluded from the universities. They were not allowed to hold, till the year 1828, any civil office without first taking the sacrament according to the rites of the Church of England. But in spite of the many limitations Non-conformity spread rapidly; "in the twelve closing years of the seventeenth century two thousand four hundred and eighteen dissenting meeting-houses were licensed for public worship."

During the reign of Queen Anne there was some decline. Doctrinal troubles began to arise. Many churches passed through Arianism to Unitarianism; and while the Free Churches in their main life have been sharply divided from Unitarianism, no one who knows the history of the Unitarian community will deny the debt that is due to it for its reverent love of truth and its high ideal of intellectual sincerity and public service. But the main stream of Non-conformist life did not go into Unitarian channels. In many ways the coldness and spiritless apathy, which was affecting all English religion, affected the dissenting interests as well. But between Arianism on the one hand, and a stiff and chilly orthodoxy on the other, there was still an intermediate position, and Nonconformity shares with all the Church of Christ such treasures as the hymns of Doddridge, who, with others, kept the fire burning on many a hidden altar.

Yet the Free Churches needed, no less than the Established Church, the new life which came with the preaching of Wesley and Whitefield. Their problem was not one of Church government primarily, but of the Gospel and its implications in human service. Wesley cared little for the interests which engaged many serious

minds in the eighteenth century. His problem was how to liberate for the forgotten and the lost all the grace of the Gospel. He had a passion for souls, which came to him along with his own experience and assurance of faith. His primary concern was not the theory of Church government, but the saving of the lost. He thought more of the life than of the mechanism of a Church. His own machinery was made by the character of the new life which arose at his preaching ; its wisdom can be judged from its permanence.

Though he was an Anglican, yet in his influence he modified Nonconformity more than any other man, and in spite of himself he became the founder of a mighty Free Church. It was only when no room was made for him and his people within the Church of England that they slowly and reluctantly withdrew into their own societies. Within the Church of England the results of this preaching were profound, and last to this day. But the title to the inheritance of the tradition of the Wesleys, both in this land and in the lands across the seas, fell to the Free Churches. It gave to them a footing in the world beyond the borders of this land. It was, in the truest sense, an imperial movement. It prompted the foreign missionary enterprise, and opened up to the Free Churches, as well as to the Church of England, "a pathway to the ends of all the earth." And in this land no one will ever measure the national significance of a movement which brought a spiritual and moral life within the range of the masses, soon to take up their power in the political life of the nation. When a historian traces the contrast between England and France in the mode of transition from the old to the new order, he must give a place to the field preaching and apostolic labours of Wesley and



Whitefield. They prepared England for the shock of the revolutionary ideals which came with the falling asunder of the feudal system. It was due to them that on their awakening, the masses found opening before them a spiritual life with new methods and resources. For a lifetime Wesley preached in all parts of England, living, as it has been said, at the pace which politicians keep at election times. If he is to be counted a Free Churchman, it is not, however, because he laid stress upon the ideal of Church government, it is rather because he would not yield to the coercion of outward forms. If these were not equal to the task of saving men, let them perish. By the very logic of their own life his people were driven to organise themselves into separate societies. The blame cannot rest with those who valued their distinctive witness more than the dignified and classic forms which gave to them no room.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century the Nonconformists occupied a position very different from the one they held at the beginning of the eighteenth century. But there is an even greater difference between their estate in 1800 and in 1900. The story of these years is not one of any one great personality, it is rather one of growth and latterly of increasing good-will among the scattered communities. It is only possible to speak in general terms of the history of these years, but some things must be noted.

The public status of Nonconformity was changed very greatly. The Test Act and the Corporation Act were repealed; the universities were open to Nonconformists, and other disabilities were removed. The political activity of Free Churchmen has often led to misunderstanding; they have been considered by some

as though they were like the character in *Friendship's Garland*, who hoped "ultimately to marry his deceased wife's sister." But no one defends the penal acts against which political Nonconformity had to fight in the nineteenth century; its strength lay in the fact that it sought justice, and not preference.

In the early part of the century the list of sects was increased by secessions from the Wesleyan Methodist Church. In 1820, for example, the Primitive Methodists formed themselves into a distinct society. The Bible Christians in 1815, the United Methodists in 1857, were offshoots from the Mother Church of Methodism. The differences which gave rise to these secessions were not doctrinal so much as practical, and they came into existence not because they ceased to be in harmony with Methodism, but because they sought to give it a truer expression. But the twentieth century had not gone far before three of these communities became federated into one, the United Methodist Church, which, in 1907, was formed from the union of three churches—the Methodist New Connexion (founded 1797), the Bible Christian, and the United Methodist Free Church. This is a happy augury for still further co-operation between these sister churches which are one in doctrine and in spirit.

The Salvation Army would not count itself a Church, but as the ally of all the Churches; but the Methodist spirit has never found a more characteristic expression than in the late General Booth and his noble wife. Their work cannot be claimed as Free Church in the strict sense of the word, but if the ideal which finds expression in the Free Churches is considered, there has been no bolder expression given to it in the present generation than this.

The desire for closer fellowship among the churches found its voice in 1893, when the first conference of the Free Churches was held in Manchester. The movement grew rapidly. Councils were formed in every part of the land. At the present time there are over a thousand local councils and fifty district federations of councils in England and Wales. The Free Church Council has already provided a means for fraternal intercourse and united service. But it has still greater tasks before it in the coming days, if the dream of a Free Church of England is to be realised. It is for such an appointed end it has been chosen; having gone so far, it must go farther, and all the indications of the past point to this as the goal—a Free Church of England on a federal basis, ready when the time is fulfilled to bring its contribution to the Church Catholic.

Nothing would be more unjust than to recite the list of sects from some directory, as though the Free Churches were to-day a scattered host of Ishmaelite sects, each with its hand against the rest. There is even now an excellent spirit of goodwill and much co-operation. The tendencies are all towards the obliteration of needless distinctions; former quarrels are being made up; experiments in united action are being tried on every side. Dissent is not taking the way it was expected to take towards a welter of individualism. On the contrary, it is moving steadily and continuously towards a unity which shall be new and significant for the future of the Christian Church.

Within the scope of this book no attempt can be made to sketch the history of Nonconformity in Scotland, Wales, and Ireland, or in the New World, or among the Dominions. The debt that Wales owed to Nonconformity, especially in the days of the Great

Revival, can never be overstated. The religious life of Wales owes its soul to Nonconformity ; its household names are those of its great preachers ; its passion and devotion have been given to its chapels. The history of Wales during the last two centuries is the history of its Nonconformity.

In Scotland the relations of Church and State have taken a distinctive course ; it is a safe rule for an Englishman to forget his presuppositions and traditions if he would learn how the Kirk is rooted in the heart of Scotland. Mention, however, must be made of the heroic defence of the voluntary principle made in 1843, when four hundred and seventy ministers, along with all the foreign missionaries, left the Kirk and formed the Free Church. Their watchword, "the crown rights of the Redeemer," shows their spirit, and the record of their sacrifices must form one of the passages in any modern "Acts of the Apostles." Whatever may come of the negotiations now proceeding between the Church of Scotland and the United Free Church (formed in 1900 from the union of the United Presbyterian Church and the Free Church), the witness of the seceders will not have been in vain. No more striking illustration has been given of the Free Church principle, and no more conclusive vindication of the power inherent in any community which is willing to venture boldly upon the freedom of Christ's Church.

Two hundred and fifty years have passed since the two thousand four hundred left the Church of England on St. Bartholomew's Day. The policy sealed on that day has had its permanent effects in English life. It has served to make the Church of England one among the Churches in England. Side by side with it have grown these Free Societies. Sometimes they have



seemed nigh to death, but they have revived again, till to-day they can claim with justice to have within their ranks half the worshipping people of the nation, and far more than half if the range is extended to cover all the nations which speak the English tongue. But no lover of the Church of Christ can be content that this separation should be permanent. Uniformity can never be the basis of union. In their resistance to that the "2400" were fighting a battle which has been won once for all. But they were not closing the door for ever upon the hope of union among the scattered members of Christ. History teaches many lessons through the mistakes of men; and through the fatal error of 1662, and many another since that day, history has taught lessons not learned rapidly, but still learned at the last. It is the business of all the Churches to understand those lessons and to accept them. Uniformity is impossible, but what is possible? What, indeed, is inevitable? The Free Churchman, as he reads the past, thinks that he can see the vision of a federation into which all the Churches shall bring their glory and honour.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE FREE CHURCHES AND THE STATE

THE history of Europe in the last four centuries has seen a gradual readjustment of the relations between State and Church. The process is still incomplete, but the trend has been towards the separation of the Church from the State, and there is little likelihood of any return to the old relations. To some the story is one of apostasy, whereby the States have denied the faith. To others it is one of liberation, by which both State

and Church will come to themselves. Within the era of conflict the Free Churches had their origin. There is no doubt of their traditional attitude. From the very beginning it was implicit in their protest, as well as in their positive doctrine of the Church, to demand entire freedom from State control ; but it took a long time and a varied experience to make this quite explicit. And the present duty of Free Churchmen is not decided by an appeal to historical documents ; it must be determined by their interpretation of the Gospel. To that lies the only appeal.

State and Church can never stand to each other in the modern world as they did in ancient Israel, or in the Europe when Hildebrand was head of the Church, or during the Commonwealth. The conception of the State has changed ; the range and the power of the Church are different in men's eyes. We are still in the midst of the transition, and many have not understood how far the thought of Europe has already travelled. It is clear that the Church cannot be regarded any longer as the State in one aspect of its life, or the State as a province of the Church. The State cannot delegate certain of its functions to the Church, as it could when there was a general belief in the authority of the Church. There is no such general belief to-day. In the modern State allowance must be made for a growing variety of attitude to the claims of the Christian Church. Once the State might delegate to the Church such duties as the provision of relief for the poor or the education of the young. The tendency in the modern world is for the State to take such duties from the religious societies, and, indeed, to look jealously upon any attempt of the Church to claim certain public duties as its right.

*On its side, also, the Church is unwilling to contract out*

*of any province of national life.* There is no boundary line, carefully defined, between the secular and the sacred. While the Church has been compelled to hand over many duties to the State, it has had to enlarge the range of its ideal influence. The vision of increased duty comes in the hour of weakened authority. The Church knows that it must speak to the whole life of the people. It no longer administers relief to the poor at its gates, but it claims to speak upon the social conditions of the land. It can no longer control the machinery of education, but it sees that the Christian faith is not one among many interests, but a pervasive influence which must colour all interpretations of the world and life. That is the problem as it stands at this hour. What relationship is possible in this new world? The Church as a corporate society may be in constant friction with the State, or in close alliance. How to adjust the relationship so that the Church shall have its rightful place, while it does not usurp any power not voluntarily given to it, is the task which faces both those who approach it from the State and those from the side of the Church. It is quite clear that there must be some relation. "The unity of the soul itself," writes Dr. Forsyth,<sup>1</sup> "and therefore of the Christian life, prescribes some form of unity, of polarity between Church and State. Simple and absolute severance is too summary, too abstract, and too negative. We all feel that more or less."

The position which faces all who look beyond the conflicts of the moment is not whether things can remain as they are: that is decided; there is change from year to year. Things will not be the same at the close of 1912 as at the beginning: the decision

<sup>1</sup> *Faith, Freedom, and the Future*, p. 325.

of the highest Court in the land has been given that the Church of England is not free to debar from the Holy Communion a man who has married his deceased wife's sister, contrary to the law of the Church, but not to the law of the land ; this decision has raised again for the members of the Established Church the question of the autonomy of the Church over its most sacred privileges. Again, overtures have been made by the Church of Scotland to the United Free Church, and in that land, which seems to offer the readiest approach to a new relation between Kirk and State, the question has been opened under conditions from which much may be expected. The question is not whether or not there must be change, but what is to take the place of the old ? And it is to that positive question the Free Churches must bring their contribution in the light of their origins and history, and the testimony given to their trust.

The problem cannot be left to the politics of party ; it needs to be reviewed upon a higher plane, where expediency and tactics do not count. Nor is it worth while to discuss how far it is of advantage to have a formal recognition of the Church on State occasions. This may be as noble as a coronation service, or as trivial as a grace before a banquet, or the blessing of an iron-clad ; in any case discussions of these things need not take the time which must be given to questions of more serious moment. What, for example, is the relation between State and Church which provides for the unfettered exercise within the nation of the spiritual powers of the Church ? How is a nation to be made Christian, not how is it to play the part of a Christian State, and to affect a religion though it has it not ?

The day of the State Church in the form hitherto



known is everywhere drawing to an end. But the Free Churches, who by their witness have had a great part in the change, cannot be blind to the truth preserved in the ideal of the State Church; the form has failed, but the truth still remains—the truth that State and Church cannot be left unrelated, and the inner life of a nation is not to be separated from the outward activities; that both in its legislature and its relation to foreign powers, and its social order, the Church has something to give to the State; and that there is such a thing as a Christian nation. The State Church, amid all its shortcomings, has been a protest against a false spirituality which would leave the soul to make its lonely way with as much detachment as possible through its earthly exile to its heavenly home.

But if the truth is admitted, the value of an institution such as an Established Church must be found in its power to embody the truth. It may have had its value as a protest against another extreme, but it need not be preserved for that reason. The Free Churchman admits the truth at which the Establishment has aimed, but he considers that whatever may have been the case in the past, in the present situation it misses the aim, and the ideal must be compassed otherwise. In some imaginary State the recognition of religion may have been or may become a confession by general agreement of all the members of the nation. They may confess as a body their common faith, and give to their inner life a common voice in worship. The life of faith is there; the expression is given to it. But a new generation arises; the expression is continued, the machinery which had been called into existence still works. The State continues to act “as if religion were present, but does nothing to ensure that it

is.”<sup>1</sup> Whether we believe it can do anything or not depends upon the first principles of faith. The Free Churchman believes that organisation must be made by life; he cannot consider it to be within the power of a religious institution, established by the State, to secure the faith of a nation. Its influence, which cannot be denied, is dependent upon the measure of agreement among the members of the nation in matters of faith. To-day, the defence to which Established Churches are driven has little value; they claim to be a safeguard against the invasion of unbelief, but they claim it on behalf of one community among many on the ground that it includes a majority of the worshipping people within the nation. It is in reality an attempt to make things right by the heroic playing of a past. The Christian religion, in its traditional form, it is urged, is a priceless treasure; many know it, more do not know it or are careless about it, or seek to cast it away. The State must protect it. It must act as if this treasure were what it is not. What is this but an attempt, as Mr. Clark has put it, “to begin at the wrong end, to make a shadow, when the existence of the substance is not assured.”

There can be no resort to coercion. The State cannot compel men for their own good to accept an established faith. It must make its appeal to the mind of its unbelieving or indifferent members. To this end, it is claimed, the tradition of the past, embodied in a national Church, is brought to bear upon the wavering or the immature mind. The case is put with all the gathered power of the past ages; the State, the living organ of the nation in its undying life, confirms the plea. Doubt and unbelief are met

<sup>1</sup> H. W. Clark, *History of English Nonconformity*, p. 12.

more effectively, it is urged, when there is a State Church.

Such considerations have weight, but it is a diminishing weight. Many considerations indeed move the soul in its decision upon the issues of faith; man is a rational being, but he has also other ways into his soul than the way of intellectual processes; he has emotions, instincts, fears, prejudices; he may be preserved for the faith by many forces playing upon him from every side. All this is true, but it may be doubted whether the voice of the State adds much to the voice of the Church; the State prestige, which makes the Church part of the national inheritance to a boy at Eton, may only alienate the ranks of labour. In the main the question whether men will continue to believe in Christ and be drawn into His Church will be decided upon other grounds, and very many within the Church of England admit that their work would be easier were it not for the State connection. The "Erastian" view, in its extreme form, would make a minister of religion a State official who reads the Book of Prayer as a town-clerk reads a proclamation. Erastianism is near to death, and neither High Churchmen nor Free Churchmen will lament its death. But while the Erastian view is dying, there are many who hesitate to lose their link with the State, lest in an age of uncertainty one more barrier against unbelief should be destroyed.

If we consider whether such a covenant between a State and a Church makes effective the voice of Christian faith in national affairs, we shall find that, on the contrary, it tends to compromise the Church. The Church seeks the path of safety in the hour of crisis; it has acquiesced in national follies; it has sung *Te Deums*

to every accompaniment of shame. When Italy won its liberties, the Church of the nation did nothing. In North America, when the great fight between the north and the south marked the rebirth of a nation, was the voice of the Church any less effective because there was no Establishment? The national Church may bless a work already done; but in the hours in which the voice of the Church should ring out and become the guide of the nation, we do not expect a Church, *on the ground that it is established*, to speak the more boldly. In such seasons the voice of justice and righteousness has been heard from lonely souls, both within and without the Church. From the days of Amos till now it is to such men the honour of the Divine Kingdom is entrusted. Long afterwards, when the work has become classical, the martyrs have their tombs garnished, and a State Church may consecrate their memory. But it is not from a society on the ground that it is established that we expect the living voice in the present crisis. The voices which spoke in the past were not embarrassed by office, they were free to speak in the face of established interests. The Free Churches claim, without any misgiving, that to break the remaining links between Church and State will not rob the State of its conscience, *but rather set the conscience free*. There is a problem to be solved; but the relation between Church and State at present, whatever may have been its value in other days, stands in the way of a true and permanent solution.

The Free Churches have had a large part in shaping the State as it exists to-day. Both in the United Kingdom and the United States their handiwork is unmistakable. The cause of political liberty and constitutional government has had no more faithful



advocates. They have had *a faith not only in the Church, but in the State*, and in this they have differed profoundly from many advocates of a State Church. Lurking in the background of many defences of an Establishment is the interpretation of the State, as though it would remain unvisited of God if it were not prompted and watched by the Divine society. The State, carnal; the Church, spiritual! the State therefore to be kept in tutelage! Against such a severance the Nonconformist will make his protest; for him the State is within the Divine will, and the influence of the Church cannot be that of a Divine society upon a profane or secular society. He recognises that the action of God in the world cannot be limited to the area where His name is honoured; nor does He depend for the fulfilment of His purposes upon the Church and the Church only.

While this is true, the Free Churches must claim that the Church exists within the inmost heart of the nation, and it must seek by all its legitimate influence to make the nation entirely Christian. They recognise certain approaches open to them. Through the constant miracle of the new birth into the Christian life they give to the State many new centres of Christian energy. As the lives are given to the world, they will not be lived within the area of the Church. They are not parcelled out into secular and sacred; the man of faith will be a Christian citizen; he has the values of Jesus to apply; he will gather to himself others by his spiritual influence. They will not need ceremonial recognition or wait till they have an official rank; they will have other ways more direct to the springs of national life. They will believe that the nation can be made Christian from within; in deed, and not

merely in name. Whenever the State has laid its hand upon the Church there has crept into its inner life a certain distrust of the supernatural; State Churches tend to become suspicious of crisis in human life, and of those approaches to the soul through the miracles of grace. But the men and women who find in the Church their new life will trust in those ways far more than in institutions. They know how life comes, and how vain it is to simulate the effects of life when it is not there.

But it is not enough for the Free Churches to leave the witness of the Gospel to the individual energies of its members. Such an answer would ignore the corporate witness of the Church within the heart of the State. It would be a grave surrender. At an hour when the belief in the corporate life of the Church is struggling back within the Free Churches, it would be a return to the weak and beggarly elements to deny the mission within the nation of the Christian Church *as a Church*. It will not be enough to say that the bond between State and Church must be severed, and henceforward the Church must trust for its influence only to the individual witness of its scattered members, mighty as that will be. Nor is it sufficient to the need of the hour that there should be a large number of churches acting in complete independence. The power of the Christian faith cannot be known in its fulness till men can speak of *The Church* as of a unity; within that federation there may be variety of expression and custom, and emphasis in doctrine or in methods of government, but the unity will be manifest and unmistakable.

How then will this Church in the heart of the nation act corporately? Will it pass resolutions and forward

them to the members of the Cabinet? Will it run candidates in the Christian interest for Parliament? It will only trust to such means if it loses faith in its own calling and resources. If it keeps its faith it will know that it moves upon another plane, and exists within the Kingdom of God, for the coming of which to earth it has been created. Such a society will not depend for its power upon the accepted methods of agitation and party warfare. It will regain something of the belief in its supernatural calling in the world, a belief often obscured by that outward recognition which sometimes has been a bribe in payment of its disloyalty. By its intercessions, by its inward fellowship, which will be as a constant hint of human society in its perfect form, by its sincere confession of Christ and by its acceptance of His values, by its living witness to the Kingdom which is to come, the Church, as a Church, will constrain the nation as the love of God constrains a man. "By things deemed weak subverting worldly strong."

The united Church of Christ will be called to make this venture of faith; and it falls to the Free Churches to sound this challenge. They may well doubt their adequacy, but they are free to call the Church within which they are found, to rediscover the true character of its witness and the secret of its defence. They too have yielded to worldly standards. They will need, no less than the other Churches, a stage of purifying; they must discard some traditions; if they are to rise again, they must die. Yet to them the call comes. For they should have learned from their history to distrust all methods of influence, except those which are true to the Spirit of the Gospel. The noble experiment of Cromwell has taught them the limitations of

the State in its dealing with the Church. No Free Churchman of to-day would accept an Establishment of Religion such as Cromwell planned. The memories of the last two centuries have only deepened their distrust of the attempt to defend or enlarge the Church by the patronage of the State, or by any official covenant with it. In their plea for Disestablishment the Free Churches must be prepared for misunderstanding; their policy is attributed to jealousy or social ambition, and it is conceivable that these considerations may move a few of the camp-followers, but an army is not to be judged by its camp-followers. At the heart of this desire for the Disestablishment of the Church is the faith that there are other means whereby the Church can do for the life of the nation the service which the State churches have never done. Disestablishment is merely a negative preparation for a positive establishment at the very centre of the national life of the Church of Christ.

“Heartily know  
When the half-gods go,  
The gods arrive.”

The era of national churches followed upon the breaking down of the mediæval Church. It has been a stage from which many gains of permanent value have been won. But it has been an interregnum. It has marked the transition from the one unity of the Middle Ages to the other unity of the age that is to be. The same centuries have seen the nations of Europe coming to themselves and discovering their distinctive gifts and callings. To this period of national awakening belongs the doctrine of the national Church. Whatever may happen in the future, no Catholicism



which arises can ever be the Catholicism of the pre-Reformation ages. The Churches which have taken their colour from their national character will bring some distinctive glory into the federation of Churches.

But it may be asked whether the end of the transition between the old and the new Catholicism may be marked for all the world in this country; whether in this land the inner truth of the national Church, which preserves the distinctive contribution of the national character to the Christian faith, may not be separated from its imperfect expression, so that its truer expression may be found. It is the hope and the mission of the Free Churches to live for the day when there shall be in the heart of this land a Church at once national, free, catholic, and holy—national because it gathers into it all that the race has to give to the Kingdom of God of insight and discernment, of passion and practical sagacity; free because it will have learned the lessons, which the Free Churches have sought to teach, that the outward forms must be continuously the vehicle of an inward life for ever sustained from the secret springs; catholic because within it there will be room for all the variety of ministry and worship that may arise within the Christian society; holy because it is separated unto God, and its life is set towards Him. This vision, remote as it seems, will guide the Free Churches aright. They will labour for it and pray for it; and since it is for them their calling, they will not wait to know when or how it is to be, for they will believe in the incalculable powers of the Kingdom which is always at hand.

## CHAPTER V

## THE FREE CHURCHES AND THE CHURCH

ORGANISED religion in the United Kingdom presents to-day a picture of confusion. In every town and village there are various assemblies of worshippers, sometimes with but little of interchange and fellowship, sometimes with none. The Roman Church will not recognise the orders of the Anglican, and to this day to many within the Church of England, the Free Churches are only the sects. The title "church" is grudged to them; and on common platforms it is still possible to admire the ingenious attempts to avoid the acknowledgment of the Free Churches as within the Church Catholic. They are "bodies" or "communions," but not "churches." It is not a matter of wonder that the average man draws a sharp distinction between "church" and "chapel," and thinks the word "Churchman" the opposite of "Nonconformist."

This is a grave error, but all the blame for it cannot be laid to the charge of the Anglican Church. There have been periods in which the Nonconformists have had a much clearer understanding of the individual life within the soul than of the corporate life of the Christian society. Sometimes they have had only a low ideal of the Church; and there has been schism. They have suffered from their reaction against the tyranny of systems, and from the isolation imposed upon them as the price of their continued existence. In some of these churches there is still an individualism which tends to self-will and to the rending asunder of the Body of Christ. The origin of the error that denies a place to the Free Churches within the Church Uni-

versal can indeed be found. It can be explained. None the less it is an error which does grave injustice to the Free Churches, which, in the true interpretation of their witness, have the highest of all ideals of Churchmanship. They are not sects which began a new religion in the sixteenth or later centuries ; they belong to the society which at the first went forth in the name of Christ to witness to His Resurrection,—to the society which has great honour given to it in the New Testament. They neither limit the word “Church” to their own communions, nor will they consent to forego the word. They are Free Churches, but they are in the Church Catholic.

In the early days of the Separatists there was some danger lest separation should be interpreted as involving the denial of the claims made by others to a place in the true Church. Barrow, indeed, wrote a work entitled *A Briefe Discoverie of the False Church*. But during their exile in Holland, these, the earliest of Nonconformists, came to give to their title another emphasis. They were not so much separate from other Christians as separated from the world to their Lord, and they were willing to acknowledge other Churches as within the fold of Christ. That has been the true doctrine of the Free Churches, however it may have been obscured at times. The earliest tradition of Nonconformity had a great doctrine of the Church ; and it is well to return across the centuries, in which individualism sometimes ran riot, to the teaching of such men as John Robinson and Goodwin and Owen. If that is done, the Free Churches will not be in any danger lest they should forget their place within the Church, “the body mystical of such as are called out of all the world into a commonwealth according to faith and holiness.”

For neither they nor any other Church can stand to-day where they did at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The Oxford movement has modified the character of the Church of England ; it is less easy to estimate its influence upon the Free Churches, because it has been largely indirect. None the less it has been far-reaching ; it has helped to restore a sense of the dignity and mystery of the Church as the organ through which the Lord of the Church acts and speaks. The Free Churches have a higher ideal of the Church to-day than they had a century ago, but this has been due not only to that great tide of thought and passion which is called the Oxford movement, but also to such teachers as Dale of Birmingham within the Congregationalist Churches, and Hugh Price Hughes among the Methodists, and very many more, who have reaffirmed the high claims made for the Church in the New Testament. So it has come to pass that whatever justice there once may have been in the distinction between a Churchman and a Nonconformist, it is untenable to-day. The great majority of Free Churchmen are coming to believe with a growing intensity in the Church Universal ; they pray for it with a passionate love, and look for the day when the Church shall be without spot or wrinkle or any such thing.

In the very act of translating the needs of the hour in the light of the New Testament, the Free Churches have discovered how central to Christianity the Church must be. They have been influenced by the new conception of personality, which lays stress upon communion, and even defines personality as " the capacity for communion " ; and in the new situation they have found new meanings and depths in the mission of the Church. The modern study of the New Testament



has served at once to justify the variety of Church organisation, and also to rule out the claim of any one system to be the only authorised and divinely chosen medium of grace. There are clearly the germs of several methods of Church government in the New Testament. No Church can be faithful to its standards if it lowers the ideal of the Church, or if it claims an exclusive or privileged position for one system. Neither Episcopalian nor Presbyterian nor Congregationalist can claim a monopoly, and it is the first condition of all progress towards the fulfilment of the Church that this should be admitted. Two things are necessary: a high ideal of the Church, and a renunciation of all exclusive claims for one system or another. The Church of the future must be holy, and it must be comprehensive.

It is important that all the Churches should return to the New Testament, not for a precise code, for that it does not give, but for the rediscovery of the act by which the Christian is made and the Church gathered out of the world. From this Book the true values can be learned; and till they are learned, there is little hope of an understanding among the churches. There is no support in the records of the new-born Church for any belief in the Church as a worldly corporation. It stands for "the holy remnant," as Dr. Oman has said, "to whom earthly might is weakness, and meek acceptance of God's will alone strength." It cannot be claimed that the Free Churches have perfectly accepted these values of the New Testament; but they, in common with other communions, are beginning to see how little the early Church cared for the things which have appeared hitherto so important to them. When they have learned the lesson perfectly they will

be ready for their place in the Church of the coming days: "Show Thy servants Thy *work*, and Thy glory to their children."

In his claim to a place within the Church the Free Churchman will not date from the Reformation. He has no reason to be ashamed of the Reformation, or to use inverted commas as he writes the word. But there are lines of descent which go behind the age of the reformers, and he will take within his communion all saints in the mediæval Church, or in the ancient churches of the East and West. He will find common ground with all believers to whom the Church is not a human institution but a supernatural society. For it cannot be less than that to him. "It is," said Dr. Dale, "the permanent home of God. It is consecrated by the real presence of Christ. The awful splendour which dwelt in the Holy of Holies was but the symbol and prophecy of a more august manifestation of God in the Church." And with these words may be quoted the language of John Robinson, as he wrote of the Church meetings in Leiden: "If ever I saw the beauty of Zion and the glory of the Lord filling His tabernacle, it hath been in the manifestation of the divers graces of God in the Church, in that heavenly harmony and comely order wherein, by the grace of God, we are set and walk." In any outlook upon the future movement of the Church among the Anglo-Saxon peoples, a fatal mistake would be made if the multitudes within these communities of which we write were counted outside the Church of which they have so high a doctrine.

If the Nonconformist criticises the Catholic Church, it is not that he demands a society more human, but rather that he sees the "Church" fall short of the

high ideals of the New Testament. It has not preserved in their clearness the notes of holiness and mystery. It is not that it is too supernatural; *it is not supernatural enough*. It depends too much on an apparatus of worship which produces a sense of mystery and awe, but not the real thrill of wonder which owes little or nothing to ritual. In his *My Schools and Schoolmasters*, Hugh Miller draws side by side two pictures, of a celebration of high mass in a cathedral and of the worship in a Highland cottage, in which arose amid the gloom the sounds of prayer truly God-directed and poured out from the depths of the heart; "and I felt," he added, "that the stoled priest of the cathedral was merely an artist, though a skilful one, but that 'in the priest and father' of the cottage there were the truth and reality from which the artist drew." By the worship and order of the Catholic Church Free Churchmen are not drawn nearer to the truth and reality of their communion than they are in their own assemblies; they see the hand of the dramatist. They who have known the presence of Christ in the midst of His people will not demand for the mystery and divinity of the Church an ancient ritual and a priesthood, and they will only smile when they are classed as outside the one Church. They have the real experience, the highest and holiest experience, of the communion of the saints, and they are of all Christian people the least likely to reduce the value of the Church. "The faith of the Christian sees in every Christian assembly gathered in the Spirit the whole of Christianity, the people of God, the total community." There, in each assembly so gathered, as Dr. Oman says, "the Church was in all its power, and in all the promise of the Kingdom of God." They who hold such a view

of the Church cannot exclude themselves from other assemblies. They will not claim that they alone are within the covenant; they will have no desire to injure any other body of Christians meeting, though not with them. They will be the true Catholics.

If it were possible to establish by law his form of Church order, the Congregationalist or Presbyterian would refuse to sanction it. The episode, when an attempt was made to establish Presbyterianism in England, would be resented by none more than by the Presbyterians. Nor is there likely to be a future for Undenominationalism—that is, for the attempt to leave out variations and to put together the things upon which all the Churches can agree. Churches are not lifeless things that they can be treated so. They are living, and each will preserve best the inner truth given to it in its vital setting. There is nothing to be gained by a pooling of certain abstract truths taken from their living embodiment. The future of union lies in the federation of Churches. Of this two striking examples have been given in recent years. The Edinburgh Missionary Conference (1910) has taught how real may be the union, and how effective the common action of Churches may be when they meet frankly and without any reserve. The federation of Christian students throughout the world has made it clear to the whole Church along what lines it must move to its true unity. In its ranks men and women of every branch of the Church meet together for prayer and service, without any attempt to disguise differences, yet prepared to receive one another as fellow-members of Christ. From such movements as these it becomes more and more certain that reunion will come not from uniformity, but from the close federation of all the



Churches. Richard Baxter dreamed of such a union, and sought to give expression to it in the days of the Commonwealth. The outlines of such a federation cannot be seen yet with any distinctness, but at least the Free Churches can make experiments in their own inter-relationship. The time is not yet come for the reunion of Christendom, but the United Free Church, which must precede it in this land, has already been advocated with passionate conviction, and it is within the range of practical affairs.

The federation of Free Church councils is one of the noteworthy facts of the time. It is more a prophecy than finished work; but it is a prophecy which gives a reasoned hope that the Free Churches will draw nearer together in this new type of union—the federal. And much of permanent value may be anticipated from experiments in united action. But even while the churches are thinking anxiously of this, the entire problem has been changed by *the entrance of the Church into the mission field*.

All the Churches have their missions. To the newly awakened Christian in China and India the churches bring their systems. From the very necessities of the case the missionaries have an opportunity of seeing familiar distinctions in another and a strange setting. They test their systems; they see the reaction produced by their distinctive beliefs. Each church has now to work out its problems on the scale not of one race but of many. Much of the old tradition has to be modified. Hostilities become softened as the outposts in the field come to know each other against the background of heathendom. And under such convictions the missionaries are coming more and more to see that the Church, in this Field, must be left

free to let its new life find its own form. "Save only as matters of Church history," writes Mr. Bitton of the London Missionary Society, "the Christian of mission churches should not be concerned with the historic, local, and, we may hope, temporary conditions which have produced our ecclesiastical divisions. Theirs must be the chance of a fair beginning and a free choice." But the opening of this new range for the Church has served more than anything else to bring together the Churches; in China and in India, and in other fields, a large measure of comity has been secured. It is not impossible that the federation of all the Churches may come from the pressure of the missionary experience upon the Church at home.

The Catholic Church of the Middle Ages can never return; reluctantly, but none the less finally, the Church of Rome is losing its temporal powers. The former unity of the Church, which rested upon a uniformity of doctrinal expression and ritual, can never be more than a memory for the race. The very word "Catholic" will become idle unless a fresh meaning is read into it. That new meaning may be given, when the witness of the Church is carried to all races, and when in many forms of government and with many varieties of expression the response of humanity is made. The Free Churches, from their history, may gather courage. They are themselves the products of movement and unrest within the spirit of man; they come from days not unlike the present; to the life and thought of Europe during the Renaissance many parallels may be found to-day in the West and the East. They won their most notable triumphs in new worlds where the faith was allowed to shape its form under the pressure of its ideal. The dominions beyond the seas tell of their power to deal with novel

situations. They can look with hope to the nations which are freshly come upon the stage of the world's drama. No church can be named Catholic which does not gather into it the Christian life taking its new forms in those lands. But from them they believe the challenge may come to the churches, that so the Catholic Church of the future may arise. It will be holy, but not a holy empire; it will be comprehensive in its willingness to lose no fragment of truth or experience from its generous tradition; it will be a federation of many churches, one in the only way possible or desirable, the way of spiritual fellowship, into which they shall bring the glory of all the nations.

The challenge comes to all the churches, but to the Free Churches most distinctly. The problem with which all the churches are concerned is transferred to the wider world. It is as though the Teacher said: You may understand the task better on the smaller scale if you consider it on the wide scale of the world.

For the present the ideal of reunion with the Anglican Church is not on the horizon. Something must be learned and something forgotten before that comes. But the Free Church of England may be compassed, and that will be a stage towards the larger unity. Much has been done within recent years. The minor Methodist Churches have united in England. In Australia and in Canada bold schemes of union have become possible. In England and Wales there is a concord among all the Free Churches that is full of promise; and Scotland has already been the scene of the union of churches. It remains for the statesmen in all the Free Churches to lay their plans with wise and generous foresight for a still larger comprehension. It may be their glory

to prepare the way for the ultimate Church. That would be reward sufficient for all the separation and estrangement of the past. They parted, as it seemed, from the fellowship of the Catholic Church for a season, that they and others might be united in the Final Church for ever. They went forth weeping, bearing precious seed; they will doubtless come rejoicing, bringing their sheaves with them.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE DISTINCTIVE BELIEFS OF THE FREE CHURCHES

It is possible to speak of the Free Churches as of one society; their increasing unity is an impressive fact in the religious situation; but within that unity there is a rich variety of thought and expression. The interest of the united action of these communities lies in the fact that here for the first time the experiment is being tried on a large scale, whether there can be unity without uniformity either of creed or church government. The thing cannot be done, the Roman Catholic will say; and it must be admitted that in the past union has been achieved only on a basis of detailed creeds. Men are unfamiliar in the world of religious thought with a federal society in which there might be many churches with varied creeds and orders. It is not in line with the past, but it holds the key of the future.

Upon the success or failure of the experiment much will depend. If it succeeds, it will show as an object lesson that the unity of the Church throughout all the world need not mean the sacrifice of any distinctive truth given to any one section of believers. Each



society will be itself. The unity will take more the form of the British than of the Roman Empire. The British Empire contains within its dominions both many and varied in race and government; it is held together by bonds which are the stronger because of the very freedom given to the parts. So the unity of the whole will depend upon the understanding by each Church not only of the common faith and hope, but of its own individual emphasis. Unity will not be served by the obliteration of all differences between the Congregationalists and Methodists, or between the Friends and the Presbyterians. Older ideals of union have been tried and found wanting. The possibility of the union of many different bodies preserving their distinctive notes on the ground of a common faith is now to be tested. To it all men of goodwill look with grave interest, for in the present it is *either this kind of unity or none at all*. In the brief summary which is all that is possible here, only the main divisions can be reviewed.

## I.—METHODS OF CHURCH GOVERNMENT

Under what forms of human society can these churches be classed? The main lines of demarcation can be discovered in the earliest documents of the Christian faith. When the Christians of the Apostolic age formed themselves into societies to witness unto the Resurrection, and to enjoy in fellowship the blessings of the Gospel, they had two models to their hand—the synagogue and the temple. The synagogues were meeting-houses used among the Jews for worship and education; they were not the scenes of any elaborate ritual; great freedom was permitted; the exposition was not monopolised by any official class.

Till this day the Free Churches keep the synagogue tradition.

But there was also the temple in Jerusalem : there the priest celebrated an ancient and solemn ritual : there the hierarchy had its home, the sacrifices were celebrated, and the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies. From that time to this there have been Christians after the way of the temple. The Catholic Church, indeed, especially since the days of St. Cyprian, has found its ideal rather in the temple than in the synagogue. The distinction brought out by Dr. Oman<sup>1</sup> is one of great importance.

But in the world to which the Christians in the early Church belonged, all the distinct methods of government which are found to-day were already known. The new society had its own principle, but it took forms already existing. Society might be organised after three types :<sup>2</sup> the monarchical, the aristocratic or oligarchical, and the constitutional or democratic. To the first will belong the Papacy ; to the second the episcopal method with its belief in official succession, whereby the continuity of the society is secured. The Free Churches, in their methods of government, belong to the third—the *democratic* or *constitutional*. And the chief distinction among them is between the two varieties of democratic societies. These have been clearly described by Dr. Fairbairn : “ If, again, the political type be democratic, it may either be indirect and representative, where the authority is delegated to certain persons, either of a special order, or simply as citizens of good repute ; or it may be direct and collective, where the enfranchised or simply the citizens

<sup>1</sup> *The Church in the Divine Order.*

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, iii. 7.

act together and as a whole. The former has its counterpart in the civil realm, though only in a partial degree, in ancient Rome; in a fuller degree in our modern republics; but in the ecclesiastical it takes shape as *presbytery*. The latter may be seen, in its civil form, in the ancient Greek cities; but in its ecclesiastical in the Independent or *Congregational Churches*."

The Presbyterian and Methodist Churches may be said, broadly speaking, to belong to that form of democracy in which the authority is delegated. Presbyterianism has been defined as "the rule of an official aristocracy exercising collective control through an ascending series of ecclesiastical courts," whereas, according to the Congregational ideal, "each congregation is a miniature realisation of the whole Church." But in practical experience there are many modifications of each system in the direction of the other. The Congregational Churches have learned much from the Presbyterians, and they in their turn have come to leave with the individual congregations an increasing freedom; and the presbyteries and assemblies attend more and more, it is claimed by Dr. Oman, "to matters in which there could be nothing but willing co-operation"; and the same distinguished scholar adds that the question should be considered whether "we have not come to the point where the watchwords of Congregationalism and Presbyterianism should no longer divide us, where we Presbyterians should admit that all rule in the Christian Church should be non-legal, and Congregationalists should admit that that is an affair of the spirit and temper of a rule not of the size of its sphere."<sup>1</sup>

While the two systems are learning much from each

<sup>1</sup> *Evangelical Christianity*, p. 75.

other, and new experiments in combining them are being tried in the mission field, it may be said that each preserves necessary truths which must enter into Church organisation. The Presbyterian rule guards against an exaggerated individualism, teaches the value of the ordered life, makes it easier for the strong to help the weak, and so provides a means for dealing with the rapidly-changing populations in the modern world.

Apart from the place the Congregational order has had as a historical protest, it still witnesses for the completeness of the individual Church in its divine equipment. All the Church is there in each community, even if only two or three are gathered; all the Church is there because Christ is there. It has had and still has for its special task to guard jealously the great idea of the Church as the communion of believers endowed with the supreme grace and the presence of Jesus Christ in the midst. All the Churches confess this truth; but it has to be guarded always, for in experience it is soon lost. Happily there are many signs that the truth is being received more and more in all Christian Churches.

In the appointment of ministers, for example, while formally there are differences, yet in reality, in the Presbyterian as well as in the Congregational order, more and more weight is given to the will of the people amongst whom the minister will exercise his gifts.

But as though to teach always the secondary importance of all organisations, along with these varieties of Church order stand the Quakers. Formally they would be classified in their method of government with the Congregationalists. They have no presbytery or synod, but they have maintained their witness with



the least possible organisation, and they have no official ministry. In their meetings, men and women enjoy perfect equality. In dealing with them it is more natural to use the analogy of the family than that of a democracy. No society has had a deeper and purer influence over all the Christian Church, for it has taught with boldness and constancy the master-truth that the life of God within the soul must always be the first thing, and all forms of social order which give form to the life are secondary.

And as though to link these Churches to the wider life of Christendom beyond the national borders, there is the Moravian Church, which had its origin among the followers of Huss. England is one of the three provinces of which this Church consists. "In constitution, ritual, and doctrine the Church is one," and each province shares the responsibility for the missionary work which is its glory and crown.

## II.—DOCTRINAL EMPHASIS

If from the forms of government we turn to the doctrines of these Churches, the task is surrounded by difficulties. There are no authoritative documents from which quotations may be given. Some of these Churches have refused to adopt any creed, others keep certain standards, but everywhere there is permitted considerable freedom in interpretation. The mere quotation of the Westminster Confession of Faith, or of John Wesley's sermons and notes upon the New Testament, would not convey to the reader the mental bearing of Presbyterian or Methodist.

If at some annual conference a stranger were to hear preachers from these Churches, he might detect the

varying accent ; but he would not find it easy to know from the doctrine itself to which communion a preacher belonged. It would have been easier in 1812. The old dividing lines are no longer observed. The present divisions tend rather to cut across all the Churches. In tradition, for example, there is a marked distinction between the Calvinist, who believed in the sovereign grace of God, in predestination and election, and the Arminian, who laid stress upon the freedom of the soul to accept the Christian salvation. The Congregationalists, Baptists, and Presbyterians are in the Calvinistic succession, while the Methodists are, from the days of Wesley, Arminian. But even this cannot be stated without reserve, for the Calvinistic Methodists, a Church with a great power in Wales, blend Calvinism with Methodism, as, indeed, did George Whitefield.

He would be a shallow observer who could imagine the questions at issue to be trifling. Calvinism has had a great past, and in its witness has entered into the life-blood of the nation. Methodism came as a warm and tender message when religion, both within the Established Church and the "dissenting interests," had become hard and cold. Its spirit is conveyed in its hymns, with their adoring gratitude to the free grace of God.

The differences were not trivial ; there is something that corresponds to them in the emphasis of these Churches to-day ; but the inheritors of both traditions can worship and serve together. There is in use a Free Church Catechism, prepared by a committee representative of all shades of thought. It is an admirable statement of the common faith, and the fact that it could be prepared and used will serve to correct any false impressions gathered from the past conflicts of these Churches in the eighteenth century and the early

days of the nineteenth. The solution does not come from a compromise so much as from a willingness to seek another plane where it is possible to bring the two truths together.

#### THE CALVINIST STRAIN

Both wings of Congregationalism, as well as the Presbyterian Church in all its forms, are in the succession of Calvin, who was himself the successor of Augustine in one side of his teaching, and Augustine was in the line of St. Paul. Calvin is often condemned for beliefs which were not central to his teachings, and even more often for teachings which practically the whole Church of his day shared with him. But the principle at the heart of his teaching cannot be lost without the impoverishment of Christian faith. It is the belief in the sovereignty of God, in the priority and supremacy of His grace in Christ, in the Godward side of the Church as its one supreme concern, in the interpretation of life as confronted by terrible facts, and the destiny which lies before the human soul. In the present age, when thinkers rightly hesitate to speak with finality upon the mysteries of human destiny, it is still necessary to secure the supremacy of God. The inheritors of the main Puritan tradition need not adopt the means once found necessary to secure the truth, but it is still their trust to vindicate the sovereignty of God. "Let what may become of man's freedom," they said, "nothing must impair the absolute freedom of God's grace. Our first concern to-day is really a secondary one—how man can be free with such a sovereign God; but Calvinism was the primary concern—how God can be free with such men. Calvinism did so much for man's freedom because it would first have God's

at any price to man, and would secure the glory of God even if most men were a shame.”<sup>1</sup>

Blended with Calvinism there has been in the Congregational Churches a certain strain, derived, it has been thought, from the Anabaptist influence. It has brought into them a mysticism whose peril is that it may cut the faith away from history, an intellectual freedom, and a strong sympathy with the social applications of the Gospel. For a discussion of the whole subject the reader may be referred to the striking work, *Faith, Freedom, and the Future*, by Dr. Forsyth.

What teachings would an observer hear to-day in the worship and fellowship of these Churches ?

Much undefined, but a common faith in the divinity and atonement of Christ, and in the secure destiny of the human race in Him ; little disposition to defend the traditional interpretation of the Holy Scriptures ; a distrust of all attempts to limit the truth within intellectual statements of belief. Sometimes he would meet with congregations in revolt against what would be called orthodoxy, or taking refuge in the hour of intellectual distress within a mysticism which has little use for the historic. But for the most part, in hymn and prayer and sermon he would find a common confession underlying all the worship. No documents could be quoted. The Savoy Declaration (1658) still preserves very wonderfully much of the characteristic faith of these Churches, but it does not bind them, and most of their members would not know of its existence. No creeds are recited, but there is a continuous witness, and it is possible to link together Goodwin and Owen with Dale and Fairbairn. Serious intellectual difficulties have met all the Churches in the present day ; modern science and history have made

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Forsyth, *Faith, Freedom, and the Future*, p. 263.



it imperative that they should restate the faith. The Congregationalists have been most sensitive to the modern situation ; this has been their honour, and their peril. But thanks to the labours of many brave scholars and divines, they have preserved their great tradition, and are learning to reinterpret it in the unity of the Spirit.

The Presbyterian Church of England has its confessions in harmony with the great Churches in Scotland—the Established and the United Free Churches. They too are in the Calvinist tradition. They have maintained the common faith with intellectual dignity and orderliness, and by their Confession and Catechism they secure the way behind the present to the great passages in the past, when the martyrs died for the Covenant. But it would be a grave error to count the Presbyterians as fettered in their intellectual life by their Confessions. “The ground-tone of the piety remains unaltered.” There is still the dependence upon God, to which the Confession gave expression ; but, in Dr. Oman’s words, “the difference is that the Presbyterians have come to realise that in a relation so personal as man’s dependence upon God the last words are love and patience, and that that is far too great a matter to be expressed in any formula.”

The Baptists are Congregationalists who practise immersion upon the confession of faith by adult believers. This, again, is no trivial difference. The Baptists attach the rite of baptism to the moment of conversion into the Christian life ; in this way they have preserved from neglect the belief in the mighty act, whereby God brings the soul to the new birth. They have made, moreover, a standing protest against any mechanical doctrine of the Sacraments. In theological temper it would be agreed that the Baptists

are the more conservative of the two wings of Congregationalism ; but there is a growing unity between them, and in many places " Union Churches " are to be found in which baptism is administered according to either mode.

Calvinism has had a great share in the shaping of the thought and life of our people ; and its commission is not exhausted. To the communities which have the dignity of standing in the succession of Calvin, is committed as a great trust the task of re-interpretation into the terms of modern thought and modern needs the doctrine which sought to secure the freedom of God in His world.

#### THE EVANGELICAL REVIVAL

Methodism represents the share which has come to the Free Churches from the great Evangelical Revival of the eighteenth century. That awakening left its stamp upon British Christianity in all its varied life ; but, entirely against their will at the first, the Methodists were compelled to leave the Church of England, since no room was found there for the new zeal and energy which had come into their lives. The Methodists have had from the early days a passion for souls ; they interpreted doctrines according to their value for the saving of men ; they believed in experimental religion. They came into being at a time when through its dryness and coldness, the Church was failing to convey to men the Gospel. Wesley was Arminian ; that is, he laid stress upon the freedom of the soul to accept the Gospel. Men were not in the grip of a stern decree. They could look and live ; and at any moment by faith the lost could return to God. With this was linked a belief in the witness within the human spirit to the grace of God in redemption. " This freedom from

uncertainty created a new rapture." The religion became a "religion of joy and exultation."<sup>1</sup>

The doctrinal standards of the Methodist Churches are witnesses to the practical character of their protest: sermons and notes on the New Testament by their founder express the practical bent of these societies. There have been secessions from time to time from the main Methodist Church, such, for example, as the Primitive Methodist Movement; but it is claimed that these separations were due to the fact that men chafed against restrictions which appeared to them to hamper their practical evangelism; they seceded not because they ceased to be Methodists, but because they claimed to be the true Methodists. To all of these communities the other Free Churches owe an incalculable debt; they have brought into their midst a new passion for the souls of men, and a concern for that response from within the heart of man to the grace of God without which the Gospel is incomplete. They have learned from Methodism to proclaim to every man that he can accept the love of God, and from a life of sin can come to a holiness to which no bounds can be set. Methodism in its early days humanised the hard doctrine to which Calvinism had been reduced. It is its glory that it has never ceased to care supremely for the bearing upon human lives of the great cardinal doctrines of the Faith.

#### THE INNER LIGHT

In the days when traditionalism had crept into the Church, as it was in the days of the Long Parliament, Fox recalled men to the real character of the life of God within the soul. The light was given in some degree

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Peake in *Evangelical Christianity*.

to every man. "Now the Lord opened to me by His invisible power, that every man was enlightened by the divine light of Christ; and I saw it shine through all; and that they that believed in it came out of condemnation into the light of life, and became the children of it; but they that hated it, and did not believe in it, were condemned by it, though they made a profession of Christ."<sup>1</sup> In such a faith the Friends have made their spiritual adventure; without official ministry, or synod, or creed, or sacraments they have maintained their witness to the presence and power of the Spirit. And in so doing they have been both a corrective and an inspiration to the Free Churches, amongst whom they work with cordial goodwill. In many ways they are the most significant of all Christian communities. All exclusive theories of the Church break down before the experience of these Christians; and their sincerity and spiritual courage may lead the Catholic to revise his views of the essential marks of a Church.

How then can these communities work together? The Savoy Declaration; the Westminster Confession; Wesley's sermons; the Inner Light—how varied they appear! Yet in experience these communions are able to have the closest fellowship one with another

They are discovering the new manner of union. They are making experiments upon which the future of the Church depends; they are greater than they know, for they are working for the new Catholic Church in which there shall be nothing lost of all the treasures received by all Christian people in all ages.

Stern tasks are before them. They have to re-interpret the reality by which they have been made. They have to guard the life continually against the tyranny

<sup>1</sup> Fox's *Journal*, vol. i. p. 34.



of the form. They have to meet the challenge of the new age; and they are free to meet it, but free as churches must interpret freedom. They are liberated from irrelevant control, from the machinery and language of other ages, from outworn philosophies, from the absorption with the controversies of the past. They are not free from the control of the Lord, who made them, once no people, to be His people.

With quietness and confidence they have to confront a bewildered age with the certainty of the life eternal and to the redemption wrought in Christ. They have no resources of any value except the spiritual resources, which always await the bidding of a sincere faith. They meet the challenge all the more hopefully because they are not uniform in doctrine, or order, or experience; for they can bring to the world through their manifold witness "all that other ages and Churches have learned of Christ and His familiar dealings with His people."

## CHAPTER VII

### THE FREEDOM OF THE FREE CHURCHES

WHY do these communities assume the title "Free"? The word has taken the place of "Nonconformist" or "Dissenting." These are convenient to set forth certain aspects of their witness, but they are not the accepted title, and they are falling into disuse; they are negative, and there is a growing sense that these Churches have a positive testimony. The word "Free" has been chosen in place of the older titles, but there is no word more widely and vaguely used, and it has become a necessity for all honest thinking that the word should be defined. The history of the modern world

has been the history of freedom. For religious thought it has meant the task of relating faith and freedom; in the realm of statesmanship it has meant the readjustment of State and Church. To write the history of liberty was the dream of that learned historian Lord Acton, and all his amazing knowledge was set towards this task, for it gathered into its range all the history of the modern mind, and linked together the ancient and modern worlds. If this is so, there is a certain presumption in the use of a word like *Free*, if its implications are not understood. It might be an instance of that love of loud-sounding phrases which has been laid to the charge of Nonconformists. Knowing the greatness of the word, the "Free Churchman" will use it modestly. He will not lay exclusive claim to it; he will be content if he can serve its sacred cause by an emphasis which he gives to it where others have failed. He cannot boast that he is the only "free" Christian; the utmost he can claim is that he has come to *discern some of the implications of that which belongs to the common inheritance of all Christians*. But very many of the differences in religion are matters of emphasis.

It clears the way to the positive and spiritual meaning of the word to rule out the interpretation which would define freedom in its relation to the protest against a State Establishment. That is only a *by-product of freedom*. It is a deduction from a first principle, not the principle itself. Many within the Free Churches would define freedom in this way, but they are living within the shelter of other defences. They represent a truth greater than they know. Liberty from the control of Cæsar is a corollary; sometimes it becomes the duty of the religious society to repel the aggression of the State, and to define what freedom involves. No Church can tolerate for a moment any attempt of the State to

determine who must be admitted to the holy fellowship of the Lord's Supper. No Church, so far as it is true to its inner calling, can allow the disposition of its offices to be entrusted to statesmen who may be agnostics, or Jews, or in fellowship with other communions. But why? There must be some reason for this in the fact of the Church, in the act which brought it into being, in the method of its continued life. The word "freedom" is political for the Church only in a derived sense; it is first of all a word which belongs, as much as "faith" and "peace" and "salvation" belong, to the realm of religion. Therefore, in spite of the fact that many Free Churchmen are content to define "freedom" as freedom from State control, and go no further, it must be frankly confessed that they would not be able to go so far if others had not gone further. They are living upon the faith of others.

Others, again, think that the word is sufficiently defined if it is taken to mean freedom from the formularies, the creeds, and traditions of the Catholic Church—freedom to shape the machinery of the Church or the expression of thought in confession or ritual according to the impulse of the life within. "I am free," a man might claim, "because I do not need to limit my inquiry into truth within the bounds of the Nicene Creed or the decisions of the Council of Trent; I need not subscribe to any intellectual affirmations of past ages." Freedom in such a mind is freedom from what is loosely called "orthodoxy." So far as this is a right claim, it is derived from a deeper principle; this also is a corollary dependent upon an interpretation of the Christian experience by which the Church is made. By itself the claim is misleading; a man is not a Free Churchman on the ground that he is set free from the bondage, as he deems it, to the creeds of Christendom. There must

be some positive principle by which he arrives at his freedom to restate in the light of modern truth the faith that is in him. If the control of Church councils is an alien control, it must be because *there is a real control which it usurps.*

In the last resort the Free Churches must rest their case upon their understanding of "the freedom where-with Christ set them free." That will set the end to which they move, and determine the limits of their claims. They do not begin with such a declaration as that of Rousseau: "Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains." The Church of Christ by its very character moves on another plane, and uses the words in another sense. It is delivered out of the bondage of corruption into the liberty of the glory of the sons of God. The freedom of Christian men has to do first of all with their relation to the unseen world; it belongs to their spiritual life. If the life of the Church is represented as having two sides and two approaches—one from the unseen, and the other from things visible—freedom in the New Testament has to do first and foremost with the Godward side. The Church is free in its inner life; there is coming and going on that side between the spiritual world and the soul of the Church; its members have the liberty of sons in intimate fellowship with their Father. This way has been made by the Lord of the Church, who is not so much the Builder of the Way, as the Way Himself. It cannot be contended for a moment that such an experience is limited to any Church or groups of Churches. Whether known dimly or clearly, it is shared by all who are within the Church Universal. But what follows? What provides for the continuance of that freedom? How is it possible for God to be free in His approach and in His control over His Church? When is His freedom threatened? It may be said that all the various ex-



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pressions which freedom takes in religious controversy are attempts to secure this inner freedom.

These Churches have asked : Can a society like this remain free on one side, *while it is hampered and restricted on the other?* In the solemn sessions for worship there must be freedom on the side which faces the unseen ; but if a Church felt conscious of something in its forms of prayer which checked the free approach of grace to the soul, and if the consent of the State were required before that barrier could be removed between the invisible and the visible, then the real spiritual freedom of the Church must carry with it freedom from such State control. It was not primarily because of democratic principles that the Free Churches claimed freedom from State control ; it would be truer to say that modern democracy has followed upon the religious claim, and not preceded it. It was because they wished to secure the liberty of their Lord within His Church that men were led to scrutinise the claims of all vested authorities.

The Free Churches have not been without Confessions of Faith, but they have claimed throughout that where an experience so creative and wonderful is concerned, confession must not be a fetter upon the thoughts of men. In it the Church, if it should so will, gives voice to its spiritual experience. The time may come when there ceases to be a correspondence between the words and the living experience. In such a time the Church which is free must be ready to restore the correspondence. Otherwise, instead of being a help, the confession becomes a check upon the soul of the Church. In a Free Church there will be a frank recognition that the creative experience may find a variety of expressions ; each age and each nation may have different idioms. The attempt to limit the mind of the Church by a uniform creed, which took shape in one period, is likely to produce an indifference in some and a life-

less orthodoxy in others. In either case the inner life of the Church suffers.

But there are many who think that freedom within the Church means freedom to hold any variety of belief, or even no belief at all. There is some confusion of thought in the claim. There is room for societies engaged upon the scientific study of the data of religion. The members may be united by a common interest in the inner life of mankind; some may be Christian, others agnostic, others theosophist. Such a society might do a valuable work; but if it claimed the name "Church," it would be a misuse of the word, for such a body would not have the character which has always belonged to the essence of the Church. There is a common habit which does not tend to correct thinking; it is to broaden the use of a word till it becomes almost valueless; it carries so many meanings that it ceases to be a counter in the exchange of thought. The word "Church" means more than "community" or "society," and its use ought to be guarded more carefully.

Freedom, as it is claimed for the Church, is freedom such as a *Church* may and must have—freedom within the range of the Gospel by which it lives. There will be freedom of expression because there is a common understanding, but the understanding is necessary to the being of the Church. Its members see how little words can do to express this unity, how difficult it is for the same experience to take the same form in differing ages, and so they allow large freedom of expression. But this liberty can only be of value when there is a certainty within the Church that there is an experience to be expressed. In reality all true liberty in confession is due to a joyful confidence in the facts of the spiritual life. Liberty is a venture prompted by the reality of the experience.

There is a general hesitation among the Free Churches to use set forms of prayer. In the eyes of many this is the outstanding distinction between Church and Chapel. In the one there is the Liturgy, and in the other the extempore prayer. There is nothing in the principle of the Free Churches to prevent the use of the written records of the Church's life in other days, and in the present day there is a longing in the hearts of many Nonconformists for their due share in the vision and experience of holy men in all ages. But the clinging to "free" prayer is not a mark of obstinacy, as though they said, "The Church uses the Liturgy, therefore we will not use it." Probably the hesitation to use the set form is due to a fear that the tides of the Spirit might be forced into too narrow channels. It is a jealousy for the freedom of the Spirit that first led to the habits of worship which are generally found to-day. The task of the future is how to secure the freedom without the sacrifice of the priceless inheritance of the saints, communicated in the written word of prayer and praise.

In this freedom towards the spiritual world the Free Churches can claim no monopoly; but they have it for their trust to think out the implications of the liberty which is of the essence of every Church. There is yet much to be done before freedom and faith are rightly related. This may be accomplished by the Free Churches, but there is a discipline through which they must pass who would teach it to others; they must separate between the essential liberties and the merely accidental and temporary settings. It is not so much their task to talk loudly of freedom as to discover for themselves, and so for the world, the one meaning of the word, which belongs to the calling and purpose and destiny of the Church.

The day of coercion is ending; there will not be the

same need in the future to vindicate the freedom which thought must have from external control. That freedom must be complete. The Church must warn off alien intruders ; it cannot obey man rather than God. But it does not follow that the witness of the Free Churches will be outworn when the idea of coercion by force is almost forgotten. But under what conditions might the name of " Free " become archaic ?

If, for example, the Church were disestablished, and in the eyes of the law all religious communities were equal, would the witness be ended ? Other questions would need to be answered before this could be known. Would there be in the Church such conditions that nothing of human machinery would be suffered to check the movement of the Spirit ? Would there be freedom for the life to take its most worthy, and, indeed, its inevitable forms ?

The Church might be disestablished, and still claim that the historical episcopate belonged to the essence of its life. Only ministers ordained by episcopal hands would be acknowledged, only one type of Church order recognised. No Free Churchman of to-day would deny a place within the Church Universal to the Episcopal Order. Yet if this were the only order the liberty of the Church would be threatened, unless it can be proved that the one method of government is inseparably linked to the gospel. But the historic argument is unsatisfying ; there are too many gaps ; the institution of historic episcopacy is certainly not essential to the Church as it is understood in the New Testament. Upon this scholarship is agreed. So long as the ministry of the Free Churches is not acknowledged, and the Churches are counted as beyond the range of the covenant, or as occasional agents in the Divine hands, so long this denial of the implications



of freedom would make it necessary to vindicate freedom. Free Churchmen could not accept historic episcopacy if it meant the denial of the order under which they had come into the eternal life. "A thing cannot have two beginnings." The argument of the Free Churchman is not that the episcopal order should cease to be, but that in justice to the demands of the life within, it cannot be the only order.

But the Free Churches will not be so absorbed with the implications as to forget the religious principle itself. Their strength lies in the tenacity with which they hold it fast. Churches which limit their programme within such demands as freedom from a historic episcopate, or from creeds, or from the letter, would be less effective than those whose great concern is to stand fast in the liberty of Christ. Hesitation to grant the specific demands must be traced back to an imperfect grasp of the first principles; till these are accepted, any concessions would be grudging and half-hearted. Only on the basis of a certain interpretation of the Christian life in its source and method is it reasonable to dissuade men from their jealous regard for orders, and uniformity, and the finality of the historic creeds. On certain other suppositions they who hold these things are in the right. The only real progress must come from an acceptance—cordial and unreserved—of those distinctive truths for which the Free Churches stand. In their eagerness for immediate reforms they must not forget the ultimate principles. This is the first of all concerns, that the Free Churches should hold the liberty which belongs to their faith, and by their witness to it should persuade all other Christian communities to a voluntary acceptance of it. So both in things political and ecclesiastical freedom will have its perfect work.

This is a slower policy than others that promise immediate returns, but in the end it is the only way. The Free Churchman will not grudge time given to the mastery of his own first principles; he will never consent to be the hack of some political party which promises him certain attractive reforms; he will continually revise all the claims of the present in the light of the One Thing which makes him a member of the Church. And until all that is necessary to the free action of that One Thing is secured he cannot rest content.

The future of religious thought in Western lands is beset with difficulties. Freedom in the sense of relief from coercion will be certain. Faith will not need to dread the edict of Parliament, still less the thumb-screw or the stake. But no less acute to-day than in former days is the problem how Faith and Freedom are to be related. To the settlement of it the Free Churches may bring a contribution of supreme value. They can help to make the future as they have helped in the shaping of the past; but their own history warns them that they will only do their part by a firm hold upon their own creative principles and an unfaltering belief that they can and will commend themselves to the conscience of men. But with this secure hold upon their distinctive truths they will combine a spirit of adventure. The same life will still be repeated, the same miracles still wrought; but what forms this life of faith will take they cannot determine now. Only this will continue to be their demand—that there shall be nothing to hinder the freedom of the Divine Life in the Church. And if they ever ceased to make this plain, they know that others would be raised up to take their place.

## CHAPTER VIII

## LIFE WITHIN THE FREE CHURCHES

THERE are many more outside than there are within. What opportunities have those outside of learning what life within is like?—an occasional attendance to hear a preacher or to assist at a wedding or a funeral ; but little else. Many members of other communions have never learned what his life within the Church means for a Free Churchman, and such unfamiliarity gives occasion for much misunderstanding. The great imaginative writers have done little to supply this lack ; for the most part they have been content with caricature or satire, and when they have drawn from life they have not chosen the normal. Nonconformity has not been well served by fiction. There the Nonconformist is too often the unctuous and rather hypocritical tradesman who exercises a mean tyranny over his minister, or an obstinate Philistine deaf to all the appeals of culture. The misunderstanding which the Free Churches suffer will not be removed by novelists, who share it.

It may be of some value to sketch in brief outline the life of a Free Churchman in his Church without caricature or satire. The baser sort may be found ; there is often petty tyranny, and an absence of sweetness and light. There are probably hypocrites in the Free Churches as there are in other societies ; but there is an average normal life, which is worthy of understanding, though it makes poor copy and may not serve the purpose of the satirist. It has meant much for the Anglo-Saxon race ; among the humble and undistinguished men and women gathered within chapels many decisions have been made of national

import ; battles have been won there for justice. For the student of social and religious life it is impossible to rest content with the customary caricature, and it would help towards better relationships between Christian communions if it were understood how deep and far-reaching is the influence of the "chapel" upon the Nonconformist, and how for great multitudes it is the one interest in life.

Sunday is for them the one Church festival. It is reserved for worship and instruction in the Faith, but it is no longer open to the charge of gloom. It is a day anticipated and remembered. There are two sessions for worship as a rule, in the morning at 10.30 or 11, in the evening at 6 or 6.30 or 7. But before the morning service Sunday School is often held ; and in recent years many Free Churchmen have worked with enthusiasm in the adult schools, which have rediscovered the value of the early hours. They are not denominational, but they have enlisted very many Nonconformists in their noble educational work, which centres in the reverent study of the Bible. The morning service consists of hymns and chants, in which the whole congregation joins, and an anthem which is sung sometimes by the choir alone ; prayers for the most part extempore, though there are churches in which the Liturgy is used ; two readings, an address to the children, and the sermon. The preacher, in addition to the sermon and the children's address, has the awful duty of leading the people in prayer. At this service the normal Free Churchman will be present with his family ; he is a good listener, and takes the service seriously ; from a long experience he has become a judge of preaching, which has a greater honour among Free Churchmen than elsewhere. It has so wonderful a power at its best that they have run the risk



of the abuse. The man of whom we are thinking will not hesitate to differ from the sermon ; he gives to the preacher no authority except such as belongs to the word of a sincere and diligent teacher, and such as wakens a response in his conscience. But he is no heresy-hunter. He is on good terms as a rule with his minister, but he is no blind disciple. The relationship is without parallel : what it can be at its worst there is no reason to describe—that has been done many times ; but what it is at its best no one can measure ; the place, for example, of such men as Dale or Spurgeon in countless lives is a spiritual fact of immeasurable value.

In most Churches the afternoon is given up to the Sunday School. It is managed entirely by voluntary workers ; there has been a steady improvement in method within recent years, so that if a Free Churchman is in this work he will know something of educational method. In the schools there will be scholars of all ages, graded according to their years. The lessons are from the Scriptures, and care is given to the task of fitting the lessons to the capacity of the scholars, so that they may be confronted by the message of the Bible suited to their actual needs. There will be two doors in every good school : one into the Church. In all probability at one time or another the normal Free Churchman has had some share in this work.

After tea he may go to the evening service. This is similar to that of the morning ; but it is an old-established custom that the message should be aimed rather at the casual hearer, and the service is more popular. Or perhaps the man may be preaching himself in a village chapel or mission-hall, or helping in a Mission. In Methodism especially much responsibility is laid upon local preachers ; and rural Non-

conformity owes a great debt to them. Their preaching will not be an echo of the sermons heard in past days, but a living testimony to an experience which will not have less weight because the hearer has dealt with the preacher across the counter or in the office.

Sunday is the day on which the Free Churches keep the Lord's Supper, as a rule once a month. The infrequency is not due to a desire to take from the honour of this service, but to the fear lest it should be robbed of its meaning by too frequent repetition. As a rule it is administered at the close of the morning or evening service. It is austere simple in form. The words of initiation are read, the prayer of thanksgiving offered, the bread and wine distributed to the people as they sit, a time for silence, the offerings for the poor, and a closing hymn. In some Churches the doctrine is that which is known as Zwinglian. There the outstanding thought is that of remembrance ; but it may be doubted whether there is a celebration which can be called "a mere memorial," and whatever the theory there is a common consent that this service, more than all others, brings the soul near to God, and speaks most mightily of the Christian redemption.

"No gospel like this feast  
Spread for Thy Church by Thee."

But especially in the Churches of the Congregational order there has been another view, which found admirable expression in the Savoy Declaration. It does more justice to the meaning of the Holy Communion as a sign of grace. But the average Free Churchman does not theorise upon this sacred hour ; he is content to "enjoy what others understand." It may be taken for granted that all Free Churchmen, except the members of the Society of Friends, will take the Holy Communion. This privilege is not reserved except in rare

cases for members of the individual Church only, but the first communion follows upon the act of joining the Church. Membership, however, in the Free Churches means more than the act of taking the communion ; it involves a confession of faith, and admits to a share in the government of the Church.

There is no uniformity in the interpretation of baptism. At least four attitudes are found. Some believe in the baptism of adults upon their confession of faith ; others practise the baptism of the children of believers ; others, again, baptize all children brought to the Church, whether the parents are professed believers or not ; and some do not use the outward rite at all. Probably the average man of whom we speak, unless he is a Baptist, will have vague ideas upon this sacrament, and may even look upon it as a dedication service. He will bring his own children to be baptized at the close of a morning service, but in all probability he will not teach them afterwards what it meant. If he is a Baptist he will regard the rite of immersion as the most solemn act in his life ; and the service of baptism, when his own children, grown to years of understanding, or his Sunday scholars are buried with Christ, will have a sacredness for him which can be readily understood.

Sunday is a crowded day, for in addition to the services there may be a Brotherhood in the afternoon into which the normal member has been drawn. This movement is not distinctively Nonconformist, but it has found its openings in the Free Churches almost entirely. By its means men are gathered for a short service at three o'clock or thereabouts. The outside critic imagines that they are either cunningly devised political gatherings or entertainments. It is true that liberty in prophesying is granted, but the service is evangelical and concerned with the soul of religion, which is "the practick part." Into such an enterprise

many Free Churchmen with their ministers have entered with much earnestness, and count it among the services which they gladly give to their Church. It is one of the marks of a Nonconformist Church when it is healthy that it claims and employs a host of voluntary helpers ; and it is part of the discipline through which a Free Churchman comes to his true life that he should take his place in the active service. In most Churches there is only one minister, and all the work of a complicated organisation must be carried out by him with the assistance of the laymen. And to this method other Churches look with a growing admiration.

Opportunities of worship between the Sundays are few—too few—in these Churches. There is usually a week evening service, in which the preacher addresses himself more intimately to the needs of his own people. A prayer meeting is still held in many churches. It is not counted an obligation to attend it, and the normal member of the Free Churches may be but seldom there. But he will have one or two evenings every week devoted to the Church, either to its business arrangements, or its class meetings or its Bible classes, or literary and recreative societies. And in addition he may be giving his help to various phases of united service, such as the Free Church Council or the Sunday School Union. He will take an interest—a growing interest to-day—in the work of his Missionary Society, which he counts as part of the work of his own home-Church. In these and other ways the Church will never be far from his thoughts ; and if he has a quiet evening to his day of life, he will find much to do in the visitation of the sick and the aged.

But there are more women than men in the Churches, and all that has been said of the devotion shown to the Church by the men could be said with greater force of the devotion of the women. Except among the Quakers there cannot be said to be a complete equality



of opportunity for women. They do not occupy pulpits, and as a rule they do not act as elders or deacons ; but in all the manifold work of a Free Church they bear a great part of the burden, and to them even more than to the men the service of the Church is an interest and passion.

But it may be urged that such a normal Nonconformist will be head over heels in political strife, for is it not taken for granted that the Free Church and the Liberal Club are the same thing under different titles ? The average Nonconformist is indeed a keen politician, and where the welfare of his Church is attacked, then like his Anglican brother he takes measures to defend it. But it is one of those errors of judgment which produce disastrous results to speak of " dissenters " as if they were a people who put their politics first. There must be very few Free Churchmen who ever heard what is called a political sermon. In most Churches men of every party can remain in close fellowship without feeling uncomfortable. Things political are not allowed to separate those who are one in Christ.

It is hard to speak of the inner life which has so many reserves ; and it does not belong to this chapter to treat of it, except so far as it is moved by the associations of the " Chapel." Newman said that for the Roman Catholic the Church herself was the truest poet, for the Church gave order and beauty to all the emotions and inarticulate longings of the soul. But this is true of many a Bethel. Attachment to it has brought order and beauty into life ; and sometimes without seeking it the Free Churchman in his devotion to his Church receives this further gift—the ear that thrills to the music of the Holy Spirit. To the minister he comes to owe a debt, but it is to the minister as the voice of the fellowship, and the voice therefore of the Lord who dwells in the fellowship.

Membership in the individual Church sets him in the heart of the Church Universal, and gives to his Christian life an eternal background. It gives to him a way out of a self-centred life into one of service. It provides for him friends who are allied to him on the upward reaches of his life. He has put much into it ; he receives far more than he gives.

He needs to make more of fellowship, and to value more highly corporate prayer and thought ; he tends to make too much of outward things ; he is not giving, as his fathers gave, his whole strength of mind to the understanding of the Holy Scriptures ; he does not wrestle to-day in prayer as they did ; but in the heart of him he is a man who does justly and loves mercy and walks humbly with his God, and he can still sing of his Church :

“For her my tears shall fall,  
For her my prayers ascend.”

There is material for comedy in the Free Churches, as in other societies. But it is strange that the only impression left after reading some books by men of imaginative power and undeniable insight is that the Nonconformists have done their mighty work among our race upon a capital of stupidity and hypocrisy. “Thou hast nothing to draw with, and the well is deep,” was once said of a biographer of Wesley ; it might be repeated of many who have thought to raise a laugh against these despised sectarians.

If they had only seen these Churches from within they would have learned the self-denial and devotion which are given to them without grudging by men who in lives of obscurity and toil have spent and been spent for their Church, and have come to themselves in that holy service and fellowship.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

AN immense literature has grown up around the history of the Free Churches. A complete bibliography could scarcely be gathered within the limits of a book such as this. Readers who wish to pursue in detail the history or investigate the principles of any of these communities will find bibliographies in standard works such as Dale's *History of English Congregationalism* (Hodder & Stoughton) or *A New History of Methodism* (Hodder & Stoughton). Most of the denominations have their book-rooms and publishing departments, from which information can be obtained.

The reader who does not wish to make a detailed study will find the following books valuable :

- A. W. Clark, *History of English Nonconformity* (Chapman & Hall). The author has made an exhaustive study of the documents, and he has been able to group his history around his thesis, which is that the spirit of Nonconformity is "the spirit which exalts life above organisation." This book has taken its place among the works indispensable to every student of the Free Churches.
- C. S. Horne, *A Popular History of the Free Churches* (James Clarke & Co.). A vivid account, written by a keen student and an enthusiastic Free Churchman.
- W. B. Selbie, *Nonconformity* (Home University Library). A masterly summary of the history, carried out with an unerring balance of judgment.
- For the understanding of the Society of Friends the

*Journal* of George Fox is indispensable, and the *Journal* of John Wesley is an English classic.

For a lucid and careful introduction to the discussion of State and Church there is the work by A. Taylor Innes, *Church and State* (T. & T. Clark).

P. T. Forsyth, *Faith, Freedom, and the Future* (Hodder and Stoughton). This brilliant work deals with the witness of the Congregational Churches, but it contains within a brief compass some of the most acute criticism and wise counsel offered to the Free Churches in recent times.

*Evangelical Christianity* (Hodder & Stoughton). In this volume of lectures, delivered at Mansfield College, the distinctive positions of the Free Churches are set forth by scholars of these Churches. No better account of their temper and mission could be desired.

John Oman, *The Church and the Divine Order* (Hodder and Stoughton). A most suggestive book, going to the beginnings of the Church.

In Dr. Fairbairn's *Christ in Modern Theology* there is a clear description of the varieties of Church order, viewed in their relation to political ideals.

Those who desire to know the statistics and other detailed facts of the Free Churches may be referred to the *Free Church Year-Book*, issued by the Free Church Council.



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